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ON THE NIGHT OF THE FIRE

BY F. L. GREEN

(Serial Number 386)

1557

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Louis Morrison, Belfast.

THE AUTHOR

F. L. GREEN was born in Hampshire in 1902. He went to school at Aldershot, but received most of his education at home during long periods of convalescence after illness. At the age of twenty-three he began a wandering life along the south of England, working at many different jobs. During this period he began to write stories, and eventually he settled down as a writer with a realistic outlook. Besides reflecting the influence of the French writers of the nineteenth century, his work is in the tradition of Daniel Defoe. The conglomerate life of a large city, and the influence of this factor upon the lives of various characters, is an interesting aspect of *ON THE NIGHT OF THE FIRE*.

His other works include *The Sound of Winter*, *Give Us the World*, and *Music in the Park*.

ON THE NIGHT OF THE FIRE

BY
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TO
MARGARET



*The scenes, characters, and events portrayed
in this book are entirely imaginary.*

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PART ONE

THE BARBER

I

WHEN he had walked almost the entire length of Kepnor Road, he turned into a side street where it was quiet and very dark. He had come a long way and had walked quickly. He had come from the lower end of Kepnor Road which bisects Punter Ward from north to south in an undeviating line. He had passed through the crowds, threading his way quickly and expertly, as he had been able to do ever since he was a small child dodging round the street markets of the road, and had not halted until this moment. Now the shouting and laughter of the thousands of people jostling in the road died out of hearing and became nothing but the mingled roar which is the breathing of a large city.

He listened to it because it was one of the things which he liked to hear. It had been familiar to him since childhood, exactly as the smoke and noises from the Punter River in flood or ebb, or the rattle of rivet hammers from the ship-yards downstream, or the thunderous machinery of the mills north of the Ward, was familiar to him. They were in his blood. He was a part of all that life, and reflected all its influences. He was one of the figures erupted by its press and clamour, but given a greater, more individual character than his neighbours. His environment had trained him but not subdued him. He was intractable. He rejected the humdrum morality of his people at moments when he felt in himself an uneasy ambition. Then his mind snatched at all sorts of turbulent impulses to clothe them in feasibility, only to renounce them later because time, or a certain chance, or some other necessary quality, was unfavourable to them.

He stood quite still in this darkened side street with the square, sheer faces of mills rising high on either side of him. In the wall behind him there was an open window. He saw it the instant he began to walk again.

He halted abruptly. He knew this street and all the mills which lined it, for in childhood he had played in and out of the doorways, up and down the first few steps of the cool

stone stairways leading to the floors where the machines thudded and rattled, and had sometimes ventured upstairs, or run errands for the foremen or the clerks in the offices. He knew where the offices were. He knew this mill on his left.

It was Glennett's, where they made steel mattresses and bedsteads. And this open window on the ground floor was on a corridor which led to the office. He put his hands on the deep sill. It occurred to him that he could climb easily to the sill and through the window. The idea became an impulse; and this time there was no obstruction.

He glanced up and down the street, and as soon as he saw that it was deserted, he climbed. A few seconds later he disappeared into the mill, dropping noiselessly on the stone corridor. He knew the way to the office.

He was Walter Kobling, a barber whose shop was in the lower end of Kepnor Road, which runs like a great artery through the Punter Ward in the east of our city. Behind the shop, in the little rooms up and down stairs, he lived with his wife Kit, and their daughter Lettie, a child of five.

He had first met Kit at a local sports arena on the night of a Championship fight between Jim Smith, the holder, and his opponent Louis Trim, a negro from Cardiff. As one of the leading lights of the Punter Athletic Club, Kobling had a ring-side seat, and after the contest he went with Smith, the victor, to the dressing-room where Jim introduced him to his girl and her sister.

The sister's name was Kit. She was dark, exciting, because of some passionate quality reflected in her steadfast gaze. Kobling looked at her. He wanted this girl, this lovely woman. They were married a year later. That was seven years ago. Seven years across his memories of things past.

Ten minutes after he had climbed through the window, he returned to the street, first of all peering cautiously along the pavements, then getting out speedily and with agility, and finally dropping to the ground and immediately setting off back to Kepnor Road. He had a thick packet of notes in his overcoat pocket. His fingers closed round them, and at once he became excited. The job was over. It had been easy from beginning to end. He smiled. After that, he began to wonder what he would do with the money. That was the next question. Would could he do with the money? It was all in new one-pound notes.

Affable, like most barbers, handsome, vain and proud in his soul, crafty and envious by nature, he walked slowly in the

direction of his home. What was he going to do with the money? The question checked all his excitement and optimism, and a cloud of caution overshadowed him, blotting out all sorts of attractive courses, and baffling him. Then, for the first time, he realised with disappointment that the money had not widened the horizons of his life as he had always supposed money would, but had only admitted another problem where already there were problems enough to frustrate him at every turn.

It was late when he reached home. His shop was a squat building half a mile from the Docks, at the lower end of Kepnor Road. Dingy like its neighbours, there was nothing distinctive about it. As soon as he came in sight of it, he felt it striking his vision like something stale, like a place of imprisonment, somewhere where his life was passing uneventfully.

One large room, entered direct from the street, composed it. Two barber's chairs facing the usual basins and mirrors were in this room, and behind them, at a distance of eight feet, was a glazed window running the entire length of the saloon. Kobling's name, in large black letters, was painted on the outside of it. Chairs lined the window and the walls. Above the chairs, near the wall, were a couple of show-cases crammed with the usual barber's stock-in-trade, while between the cases were play-bills advertising the city's three theatres; and high above these was a large picture showing a nude girl—very shapely and olive-skinned—daintily dipping her foot into a forest pool. It was a faded advertisement for somebody's toilet preparations and would have been discarded long ago but for the fact that the regular customers admired it. Also, its removal would have revealed an expanse of wooden wall whose paint was much brighter than the surrounding surfaces.

The saloon was well patronised, particularly on a Friday and Saturday night when, besides coming for shaves or hair-cuts, men called for a few minutes to gossip, hear the news, place a bet. Kobling worked in the saloon, chatting with his customers who sat lined against the walls and the window. He was alert, witty, a man of tact who felt his way shrewdly along all the avenues of arguments and conversations, so that to his customers he appeared a friendly man, full of news, well-informed about politics or indeed any subject which happened to rise during the endless discussions. In all those talks, he always contrived to keep on an objective line, never allowing himself to come in too heavily on one side or the other in case

he antagonised his customers. It was the same when he was at leisure. His trade had imposed this streak of tact on him, and made him sometimes timid of opposing the opinions of other men.

That was irksome to his proud, assertive spirit. In the saloon and out on the street, he was as affable as sunlight, but when the shop was closed and he sat in his little sitting-room at the rear, he chafed under the indignities which his work forced on him. The ingratiating smile and greeting: the everlasting necessity for placating the stupid, the weak, the bigoted, the bullies, men of lesser intelligence than himself, men who could not hold a candle to the range and vigour of his intellect.

He groaned and spat viciously into the fire, and presently getting up, he dressed himself and strolled down to the Punter Athletic Club. There, amongst a crowd of boxers, sparring partners, decayed seconds, and athletes, he was happier.

He was always in first-class physical condition. Stripped, his body was a perfection of line and substance, finely proportioned, lithe and graceful. He tipped a little over twelve stone, and stood five feet eleven. In every way he was a good athlete; but as a sportsman he was a failure.

He could not suffer the humiliation of a knock-out or even a blow that took him off his guard and sent him reeling to the ropes. At once, his blood flamed, and he came back only to seek the revenge which his pride demanded. He could never take a rebuff even in banter. Anything which threatened his estimation of himself was intolerable to his pride. He could never take a back seat. He had to be in front, in the centre of things, holding the reins, or else be discomfited and reduced to an awkward silence which he would remember for days afterwards with shame and fury.

Envy and pride were the prime factors of his character. He envied the youths who took themselves to the coast where they browned their bodies under the sunlight. Once a week, for an hour or two, was all the chance he had to sun himself, and more often than not the day was wet or cloudy, and he was obliged to content himself with a chilly swim, and realise that when he went to the Club his body would show white as a girl's against the tan of the other men.

That, too, irritated him. He sighed, spat again. Some day he would alter it all.

An apprentice assisted him in the saloon, working up the lather on customers' chins so that Kobling could whisk off the

soap and grimy stubble in a few deft strokes. On a shelf near the basins there was a large cocoa tin. Its lid was sealed, but a hole had been cut across the top, and through this slit the apprentice dropped the coins which customers tipped him. There was a printed notice behind the tin. "JIMMY'S BOX." But no apprentice had ever harvested the contents. Day by day the tin grew heavier, until at last, expectantly, the boy would take it and open it while Kobling stood behind watching.

It was strange. Last night it had been heavy. This morning it was light. It was empty.

"There's nothing in it! Somebody's took the money!"

"Somebody? Who?" Kobling exclaimed.

"Somebody has. It's empty."

"So it is!"

"Somebody . . ."

"Are you accusing my customers?" Kobling demanded.

"No, sir . . . but . . ."

"Or me?"

"No, sir."

"Do you know who took it?"

"No, sir."

"Well, then, keep your mouth shut until you do."

Then there had been another occasion when Jimmy had felt the tin full and heavy in his hands. Kobling watched him as he opened it.

"There must be a couple o' quid in it, Jimmy!"

The boy ripped off the plaster and removed the lid. There was nothing but fourpence and a big stone.

"Tch, tch, tch!" the barber exclaimed. "Look at that! Stolen again! Dear me, that's bad. How many times is that?"

"Five," the boy said, despondently.

"We'll have to put the police on the look out." Then he looked at the boy and burst out laughing. "Fancy! A bloody big brick and fourpence!"

"Never mind," he went on. "Here's a tanner. Stick that in and start it up again. Better luck next time."

Months passed. Jimmy left, and another boy came. Just as Jimmy had done, he put his tips in the tin and lost them. The boys knew. They said that Kobling was mean, that he had taken the money. But nobody believed that tale.

Nevertheless, it was the truth. Two things moved the soul of this man and gave it its real character: greed and vanity. His love of money, and his love of himself. They obsessed

him. He hankered for wealth and a chance to use it, a chance to express himself fully beyond all the irksome monotony of his life.

He thought of all this as he entered his saloon and went into the room behind. He had over two hundred pounds in crisp new one-pound notes. They were in his overcoat pocket. He did not know what to do with them. He flopped down in a chair near the fire. Presently, he spat at the flames. He was bored and discontented and disinclined to talk with Kit who sat opposite him.

II

Kit was thirty. Although she and Kobling were still in love with each other, there was a peculiar conflict still unresolved between them from the days when he had first courted her. She still cherished all sorts of hopes and ambitions which she had had long before she had met him. She had never quite renounced them. They were still waiting for her, like seeds stored safely for a future planting.

When he had first pursued her, she had liked his non-chalance, his independence. His wit and sparkle, his eloquent passion, his wild promises, had intrigued her. He trusted her, he believed that she loved him. She pitied him for that belief because it was doomed to disappointment.

She tried to elude him. What was she to do with this ardent, determined lover? When she told him that she detested the Ward and was looking for a chance to leave it and find work and a future elsewhere, he hardly listened to her. It was like a challenge which he would not accept.

Sometimes she had relented, and when she had nothing else to do after her day's work in the mill, she strolled down to his saloon. Then, if it rained or she felt too tired to walk, she stayed there, cooking a meal for him and staying to share it. And under the spell of his brisk society, the prospect of being his wife and living there with him had seemed momentarily alluring, and his saloon with its drab dwelling at once enchanting.

They were married three months later. After a week-end at a popular seaside resort, they returned to their home. The rooms above and behind the saloon.

The whole place had been renovated inside and out, and re-furnished. It smelled new, and looked more enchanting than ever. A faint pride of possession moved in her heart as she

went from room to room and heard the bell ringing in the saloon below whenever a customer entered. This was hers. Her home, her own place. Then she heard Kobling and his customers talking, and at once she was disquieted. She had a presentiment of long, monotonous days ahead of her when the ecstatic reality of love would become a commonplace feature of her life and lose not only its joy but every quality which was dear to her. She rejected this new life which, like love, was only a snare. She would not give up her hopes which she had so carefully guarded. She had something which not even love could command. She knew it, and was glad.

Yet every day that dawned was part of her future coming stealthily and stealing past her until a year had gone and she was settled deeply into this life. How quickly that year had flown, and how insidiously time had touched her and gone past! A whole year! And what had happened?

The fresh coat of paint which Wal had put on the entire building was already fading. The new smell was gone, and the sour odour from the district had returned to invade the place permanently. The shop, and the rooms behind it, no longer reflected the new prospects of her life or reminded her of the day when she and Wal had returned from the honeymoon. They were Wal's again. His shop, his home. The old smell of them again! It was like living in the past.

And all the glamour of love which had given such miraculous substance to those early days, was gone. Love had become a habit, still tender, still beautiful, but somehow firmly established not so much in themselves as in the drab framework of their existence in this lower end of the Ward. Its soaring qualities were gone, its wings clipped. It no longer took flight. It belonged to the routine of their home; and she knew that it could only flutter around in little circles and return, like the pigeons which her neighbours let loose on the summer air, binding her to this spot despite all her desire for space and opportunity.

Often she was restless and discontented. During the year, her sister Dora had married Jim Smith, the Champion. They were rich and lived in a large house in the West Ward. Jim was training for future fights. She could not help making a comparison.

Was Jim cleverer than Wal? She laughed. He was all brawn, heavy, slow, insensitive. But before an opponent he came to life and was exciting to watch. Whereas Wal was always vital; even when he was silent and meditative, he had

a quality which gave an impression of underlying sharpness. He had wit, personality. Why, then, did he not progress?

She had the answer in her own mind. She knew many things about him. She knew that he was vain and envious and greedy, and that he wanted better prospects but had not the imagination to fashion them in his life. Like Jim, he saw only the immediate fight; but the immediate combat brought Jim big prizes, whereas the rewards from Wal's labour were never more than a profit of five pounds a week, from which sum all sorts of expenses had to be met. And all this while, lying like a seed in her heart, there was her own ambition.

It was like a restlessness or curiosity. She wanted to see what was beyond this city. She longed to be active, to feel in peril, to create her own security, to know the whole chord of emotions. To taste, to give and demand, to use her strength, to see and hear and feel.

She took her troubles to Dora and discussed them. A solution of sorts was found, for Dora was bored and restless too during Jim's absence at training quarters. So, within a few days, the sisters began to frequent certain places, driving there in Dora's car.

They visited the fashionable shops and restaurants. They seldom missed a *thé dansant* or a *matinée*. They attended all the select mannequin parades, the cinema trade-shows, where there was always a buzz and glitter, a jostling of wealth and fashion which seemed to give promise of all kinds of exciting contacts. It charmed Kit. She bought expensive clothes to go to these places. She looked beautiful, and felt that she was achieving something.

Thus, with these new pleasures engaging her, some of the old causes of discontent were dispelled; but in their place, there came anxieties of an alarming character which pumelled her much more harshly than had her discontentment before.

She was in debt. She owed money to Dora, as well as to a fashionable *modiste's* establishment where Dora, too, had an account. But apart from these debts, there was another which troubled her. It was contracted with a neighbour, a draper, in whose dim, cavernous shop she often purchased odds and ends of millinery and sometimes more expensive things which he offered her.

His name was Andrew Pilleger. He was a man in middle-age, a dry, solitary person who seldom spoke above a whisper. The habits of his trade, as well as his days in the musty shop

and the course of his own character, had bent his tall, bony frame into an attitude of servility which did not altogether conceal his dangerous cunning. In youth he must have been handsome; but now his years had drawn a film over him: a taut, glistening skin which seemed to constrict his movements, dim his eyes, stiffen his lips and make them cold and pale, and let the great bones of his skull and hands jut like repulsive nodules.

She owed him seventy pounds. The debt had been running for years, throughout her pregnancy and on to the present. She never seemed able to reduce it, the interest mounted so rapidly. Whenever she made a payment, Pilleger said: "That will settle last quarter's interest." And behind the interest, there was a cloud, a huge, menacing sum, the capital sum. Seventy pounds.

III

There was a little crowd round the mill; and later in the day, long after the crowd had dispersed, people who went past the mill looked at its sheer face, its large square doorway from which the hum and tread of machinery sounded, its rows of windows, as if there would be some sign of what had happened. But there was nothing to see that was at all unusual, except perhaps a policeman going in and out of the place.

The theft was reported in the morning newspapers. A sensational robbery at Glennett's the previous night. The safe had been forced, and over two hundred pounds in one-pound notes had been stolen.

Kobling saw the headlines when he opened the paper over his breakfast. He read them, and down the first half-dozen lines of the column. He remembered the cold, coarse stone of the window sill, cold and coarse under his gloved hands; the smell of oil and stone in the corridor; and the safe, the modern safe, one of those things like a cupboard in steel, but strong . . . where was the lock? . . . where was the hinge? Look all round it, and get ready to try to break it open with a wrench. Only to find that the thing was open after all! Someone had forgotten to lock it! The phobia of all cashiers: the safe that wasn't locked! A chance in a million, and he was there, he was grabbing the pile of notes!

" . . . the safe cleverly forced. . . . "

The liars! Somebody would sweat about that! Someone would stand before someone else and admit it.

"I was so certain, sir, positively certain, that it was locked last night."

"But it couldn't have been! There's hardly a scratch on it! Had it been properly locked, it could not have been opened without a charge of explosive! It's burglar proof!"

The newspaper said "cleverly forced" and thereby flattered him for something he hadn't done. That was good, but it was a pity, too. He wished they had spoken the truth, for he liked at this moment to imagine himself as a lucky man. He wanted to believe that fortune had really played a hand to him this time. The open window, the deserted corridor, the watchman in a distant part of the building, the office open, the safe not locked. Luck! His luck! A man under the wing of fortune at last!

He turned to the sporting news. There was something he wanted to read there about the Arsenal and the Wolves.

"If you spoke one word, all the ships in the river would up anchor, and the statue of Queen Victoria would bow its head," Kit said.

He looked up and smiled, passing his cup to her. He split the paper. "Here, have a look at the ladies' page."

He went on reading about the Wolves. He couldn't concentrate. There was a stir in his mind. He felt that something had started for him. He had taken a chance, walked in. Like that! Walked in and found his luck waiting for him! If that wasn't something! The nerve, the cool nerve, and the success which was the reward for it!

If only he felt safe about the notes. That was the flaw in his luck. He wasn't sure that it would be safe to use them. And another thing which hurt him was the necessity for silence. His pride wanted to talk about what he had done, but he had to keep silent. His luck, which was a fact to boast about, was no more than a secret thing which he dared not admit to anyone. That was all. Something to keep absolutely silent about. And the notes, nothing more than two hundred pieces of paper to keep hidden.

He stood outside the entrance to his saloon, sniffing the wet morning air, letting his senses awaken to the noise, the light, the smells. His consciousness came down from its daring flight and slipped back to its perch as something which was part of the life of the Ward. His chance had come, and he had taken it and been lucky. But what now? Silence, sudden fears, suspicions, and a sense of guilt. That was what had started for him. And it wasn't worth just over two hundred pounds.

He turned back into the saloon and lit the little geyser. The apprentice came in as he was taking the clean towels from the cupboard.

"There's been a robbery, Mr. Kobling. Up at Glennett's."

"Who said?"

"It's in the papers,"

"What they say?"

"Two hundred pounds stolen from the safe."

"That all?"

He was filling three shaving-mugs with warm water. The boy saw his face reflected in the mirror. He was grinning. The boy started to grin, too.

"That all, I'm asking you?"

"I think so."

"Let's see what they say," Kobling went on. He wiped his wet hands on his white overall, and unfolded one of the morning newspapers delivered for use in the saloon.

"Daring affair at Glennett's Mill in Pond Street. Thieves make off with more than two hundred pounds in notes after forcing safe."

The bell on the door rang as a customer entered. Kobling folded the newspaper and made a gesture of greeting with his hand.

"Morning, Jack!"

"How do, Wal?"

The man sat down in one of the chairs, putting his head back as the apprentice arranged the sheet round him and began making a lather on his face. He was a short, red-faced tradesman.

"Seen about the robbery?"

His voice was thick with phlegm. The voice of men in little shops, of men in the little bedrooms above shops up and down Kepnor Road. Small tradesmen, yawning as they dressed, coughing the smoke-dust of the district from their wide throats. He began to cough as Kobling answered him.

"Was just reading about it when you came in."

"Smart bit o' work. Daring."

"Daring. That's what I was thinking," Kobling said.

"But I only read the headlines."

"They got off with over two 'undred quid."

"Two hundred! What did it say?"

"Said the safe was forced. . . ."

"I saw that bit."

"Seems funny to me. Watchman was there and 'ad made

his round, then he went back ten minutes later and found the safe open. So in ten minutes, see, in ten minutes . . . Bust a safe in ten minutes? Sounds sort of quick to me."

"You're right. Sounds funny, does sound wrong."

"Cleverly forced. Bleedin' clever!"

"Nice job for the Police!"

"They said they 'ad a clue."

Kobling was stropping the razor. His hand became slow; motion died out of it, like power waning from a machine. His mind was working, trying to think what his hands had touched, or held. Fingerprints! But no, he had been careful and had put on gloves. His hand holding the razor began to move again; movement made them remember.

"A clue! That's something to start on. I never saw about that."

He examined the razor's edge.

"Yes, a good clue. A button," the tradesman mumbled out of the lather.

Kobling's brain jerked. A button!

"Was it, Jack? A button!"

"With the maker's name on the back."

"Go on!"

"Good clue, eh?"

Kobling turned, with the razor poised, then placing his left hand in position on the face, he began to shave.

"You're right, Jack. Makes it easier. And is that the only clue they've got?"

He wiped the razor. "That's all," Jack said.

Kobling resumed work with the razor. "Well, I call that a good clue, providing. Providing they can trace the man or woman of the fifty million who have the same sort of button."

He laughed. Jack laughed, and the boy lounging ready for the next lather joined in.

"Yes," Jack murmured.

"Yes," Kobling said. "A manufacturer makes lord knows how many millions of buttons with his name on all of them. . . ."

"But . . . but . . ."

"What?" Kobling asked.

"But not all the same size, and not all the same colour. And not with a bit of thread in them."

Kobling kept him quiet by shaving him. He did not wish to hear any more just yet. He wanted time to think. It was like a boxing bout in which he kept receiving jabs.

"Still, I don't know," he said, wiping the razor. "There's thousands made of the same size, same colour. Must be."

"All the same . . ."

"But how could they trace . . . I mean, think, Jack: one button. . . ."

"I don't know so much, Wal. They got patience. They got ways of following clues, and they got all the time to do it."

Kobling went down the left cheek for the second time.

"You find this razor pulls, Jack?"

"I was just going to say, Wal. Pulls a bit."

"I've got a set came back yesterday from the makers. Shan't be a tick, Jack."

He made a sign to the boy. "Lather the gent." And left the saloon.

He entered the sitting-room behind the shop. Kit was there, and as he came in she watched him go to a case in the corner and take out some razors. She resumed her work. But when he had shut the cupboard, he unfastened his long white coat and glanced at his jacket beneath. The lowest button was missing. He whipped off his overall, then the jacket.

"Sew a button on for me, will you, Kit? And leave the coat here. I'll come in for it in a tick."

He passed the jacket to her and scrambled quickly into his white overall. As she took the garment, he waved to her and returned to the saloon.

IV

It was hardly ever out of her mind, this debt she had contracted with Pilleger. She had confided in Dora.

"Don't worry, Kit. Nowadays, nearly everybody owes money to someone else. Even the rich!" Dora said.

Kit had believed it at first, but not now. She knew that to live haphazardly about money, to be in debt, was also a failing common to the poor, the thriftless, the stupid and unfortunate. Thus, she was no better than Pilleger's poorest customer going in timidly, or brazenly, to buy a spool of cotton or piece of cloth and having it charged to the account. And at that, the idea of being in debt became sordid and more irksome.

It invaded her leisure, her happiness. Once, it had been easy to bear, and she had not thought about it. Now it was constant, irritating. She loathed it because of the way it was attached to her.

She took Wal's coat and sat down with her work-basket on the table in front of her. The coat had a faint male odour. Wal. She held it up and smiled. An empty Wal breathing at her from the sleeves and neck. She saw the loose thread hanging from where the button had been.

When she searched in the basket for a button to suit the others on the jacket, there was not one there. She had nine or ten buttons spread on the newspaper which lay on the table. She went over them again. They didn't suit.

The headlines about the robbery ran beneath them. She brushed the buttons aside and began to read right down the columns until she came to a certain paragraph. It told her about the clue, the button with the manufacturer's name on it. A brown button.

She was searching her basket for a brown button. That was strange. It made a strange little design in her mind. It was just as if she stood on the fringe of a crowd where one voice rose specially calling her.

Her hands pounced on the jacket and turned over one of the brown buttons. And it was alarming, it was the worst thing that had ever happened to her, when she read the maker's name on it. But no, no, she whispered, it's silly, he wouldn't! Why would he?

She began to feel afraid. She was afraid that she would not be able to convince herself that he had not done it. She stood up and beat her clenched hands against each other as she repeated: "He didn't. He didn't." Her words made no convincing argument, nothing that would ride over her suspicion. Instead, they rolled back, checked, dispersed in their attempt, defeated by the hard image of truth.

Then she took hold of his coat and carefully, because there mustn't be any marks left, cut off the remaining buttons. She held them in her hand. Into the range fire? No, because sometimes they didn't burn; things didn't always burn to ash. She ran upstairs and made them into a little package which she flushed down the lavatory. Lettie called to her from her bedroom. She answered: "Go to sleep. I'm going to the draper's, but I'll be back soon."

She scrambled into her hat and coat and ran downstairs, thinking all the time of Pilleger and the debt. But there wasn't another draper within a mile. Time was important. She would have to go to Pilleger.

Wal glanced up as she hurried through the saloon. The customer was wiping his red face with a towel. He noticed her

and nodded. She was able to switch her own glance to him.

"Nice morning, Jack!"

"You're right, Mrs. Kobling."

She smiled and was gone without crossing her glance with Wal's. The October morning was damp but sunny. It smelled wet from the river. Just before dawn there had been a heavy downpour lasting an hour. Now, under the breeze and the sunlight, the scene sparkled and was clean for once. The wind gusted through it, fresh and boisterous, with a smell of the sea and the river. The drench of sunlight was not yet staled by smoke. A swept world flowing with light and sound: the sound of traffic on the streets and the river, all expanding to the sky's bright dome and showering back in slow echoes one upon another.

And there was motion and sound in her senses. They made a total, setting something into activity, impelling her. A feeling of doom, cold as the sea, wet and strong as the breeze, swirled in her pulses, encircling her heart.

Pilleger's shop was barely fifty yards away. As she entered she saw him in the half-light, his body merged into the perpetual dusk far down the counters, and only a gleam from his hands and face showing and making his presence visible.

He saw her as she approached the counter; and keeping his eyes on her he motioned away the assistant standing there, and came prowling up to attend to her himself.

"Good morning, Mrs. Kobling!"

If he had anything to say, she hadn't time to listen or admit the threats or fears which he wanted to give her or coax cruelly into her thoughts. She had something else to do.

"Good morning. I want a card of buttons, please," she said briskly.

He nodded and joined his hands. It was a sign that her request had his attention.

"Splendid morning. . . ."

She tried to hurry him. "Dark brown buttons, please."

He nodded again, lowered his gaze, letting himself be forced along.

"Certainly. Any particular size?"

"Show me some, please; then I can tell."

"Large, medium, or small?"

He turned his back on her and reached a box from the shelves behind. Cards began to fall on the counter as he tossed them down with sidelong glances as his hand moved.

"For a dress?" he asked.

She held her head down and ignored the question as she made her selection. "This one will do, thanks. I'll take this one."

He turned to her. His thin, slow fingers took the other cards and returned them to the box.

"For a new dress?" he repeated.

She nodded. Her fingers opened her purse.

"How much is that, please?"

Unhurriedly, sure of himself, he repeated his question.

"For a new dress, then?"

She looked at him. "Yes, something new. A winter coat and skirt."

He made a grimace of disappointment as he said: "And you didn't come to me for the material?"

"My sister bought it for me."

"And you won't let me make it up for you?"

"Oh, it isn't that. I would have let you do it, only my sister wanted . . . wanted her dressmaker to do it. I couldn't refuse, seeing that it was a gift."

"No, of course not," he said, speaking slowly and repeating the words while he kept his eyes on her. She saw them like things which stripped aside all her lies and her confusion and discovered the truth.

"No . . . no . . ." he murmured.

"How much will the buttons be?"

"The buttons? Oh . . ." he smiled. "Ninepence, please."

Then he leaned forward. "There's a little matter. . . ." His voice lowered. His manner changed. "You remember?"

"Yes, of course I do," she declared.

"I was wondering. The interest . . ."

The peculiar thing was that for the first time since she had got into debt with him, she did not feel any necessity for humouring him. She was no longer afraid. Instead she was angry. "I told you! I haven't forgotten!"

He suddenly straightened himself and made a gesture of annoyance. "So you've purposely not made any payment since August?" he exclaimed.

She realised the little snare into which she had fallen. She frowned at him. "But I've just told you!"

"Yes, I heard you. . . ."

She cut him short. She was furious. At that instant, the shop door opened and a woman entered and came close to the counter beside Kit. But Kit took no notice of her, except to flash a quick glance at her, recognising her at once as a notorious figure of the locality, a drunken half-witted beggar,

a gross figure of fun, a petty thief, someone of no account. She went on addressing Pillegger. She was lost in her anger, and nothing mattered except that she should tell him.

"I told you! I said I would repay it, and I will. . . ."

"Just a moment. A moment, please. . . ."

He put up a hand to restrain her, and turned to the ragged creature beside her.

"Now you be off! Out of here! Go along!" And still with an agitated hand which implored silence, he murmured to Kit.

"But, please! A moment, while I get rid of her!"

"I said I would pay you. I'll pay it to-morrow afternoon!"

He stood back, silent and angry, his lips pursed. He could not manage these women. The first stormed at him, while the other stood listening, breathing heavily with pleasure at the spectacle, her cracked features awry in a monstrous smile.

"You always say that! To-morrow, to-morrow," he said angrily.

"Very well. I'll say it again. To-morrow afternoon. Every penny of it! You keep me here, as if I had all day. I've got the money, and I'll bring it here and pay you every penny I owe you! Then it'll be over and done with! I've got the money."

"That will suit me, Mrs. Kobling."

She took her purchase and left without another word.

He came round the counter in a stride of fury, taking hold of the ragged spectator. "You get out of my shop, Lizzie Crane! You keep out of here, you devil! Prying into what isn't your affair. Putting your sly fingers on things and stealing what doesn't belong to you. Go along! Double quick. Trouble. . . . You're always on the scene when there's trouble. I've seen you, along the Road. . . ."

"Oh, Mr. Pillegger! Only a bit of lace," she whined as he ran her to the door.

"Get out! I'll send for the Police!"

"Let me go. I'm going. The Police is my best friends!"

He laughed. "I know. You're their barometer for trouble. Out you go. And don't come back!"

He gave her a shove which sent her reeling into the street where she swayed on the pavement and came back, her body rippling with hurt and indignation, her arms shaking as she roared at him.

"She'll pay! She'll pay every penny!"

That amused him. He held the door open wide enough to speak to her.

"Who'll pay?"

"That Mrs. Kobling! She's got the money! Every penny of it!" she rejoined.

He stopped smiling and closed the door. Outside, Lizzie went on shouting. A man went past, and she waylaid him.

"She'll pay! She's got the money!"

She broke off and laughed, covering her raddled face with her hand, lowering her head until her hair fell in long, greasy wisps over her brow and hand, her words smothered at last by her hair and her wheezing breath. The man shot a glance at Pilleger, and grinned. But the draper refused to notice him.

He had something else to think about. His eyes were on the sky, far above the scene, but his ears were taking every word Lizzie uttered. He went back to his counters. Very slowly, like light invading darkness, the truth reached him. Buttons. Buttons to take to a dressmaker who was making up the material! And she had the money, Mrs. Kobling had! Money and buttons. It would have been worth a bit of lace to be assured of that.

v

Kit hurried through the saloon. Another customer was there. Wal paused his scissors and comb for an instant and glanced at her, the smile on his face passing as she lowered her head and went through without making any response.

Ten minutes previously she had left the place to buy buttons, to attempt the obliteration of a clue. She had believed she could do that. Now she appreciated that she had shared his secret and clutched at a means of escape from her debt. She had made herself an accessory to his crime. She had embarked on her own perilous venture, so that there was something more to do than sew on buttons. There was Pilleger to pay.

Her outburst to the draper had surely admitted too much to him. She was frightened at the way in which her conscience had so easily succumbed to the temptation to use whatever money Wal had stolen. The sense of motion which had given her that feeling of cold doom had not abated. All these facts disturbed her. Within the space of ten minutes for so much to happen! For the whole character of her life to veer like this! It was horrible.

She sewed on the buttons quickly, then she set about her housework. Every time the bell rang in the saloon she stood

still and listened, and was only reassured when she heard the hearty voices murmuring, or laughter suddenly rising.

At half-past twelve, Wal came in to dinner. She had set it in the kitchen, out of earshot of anyone in the shop.

"What's up?" he asked. "What's this for? Why in here?"

"I want to talk to you, Wal," she said.

"What's wrong?"

"This," she said. "This bit in the paper."

She gave him the morning paper folded to show the report of the robbery.

"Oh, yes. Chap was telling me about this. Said there was a clue, a button or something. . . ."

She handed him his jacket. "Here's your coat. I sewed on the button for you. I cut off the old ones, and put new ones on."

"What for? There was only one."

"Because they were the same as the one the Police found at Glennett's Mill."

"Were they?"

"Yes."

He stared at her and laughed. "What's up? What are you looking at me like that for? Anybody would think I took that money!" he said. He drew in his chair and settled to his dinner, forking a large mouthful of food and chewing quickly, with his head a few inches above his plate.

He waited for her to speak, but when she was silent he began to laugh. "Lord, you're funny, Kit! Think I did it? Think I'm a cat burglar?" Without raising his head, he peered at her.

She put down her knife and fork. "Wal, where is it?"

"Where's what?" he rejoined, irritably. She did not answer him. Pale and rigid and silent, almost relentlessly, she faced him across the table.

"Looking at me like that!" he murmured.

For two or three minutes he went on eating without speaking or looking at her; until, furtively, he ventured another glance. Her eyes held him, and this time there was no escape. He put down his knife and fork, and getting up went to a corner of the kitchen where there was a little table. The table drawer was never used because it was hard to open and close. He gave one tug at it, and drew out a parcel. As he came back to Kit he unwrapped the parcel and placed the contents beside her. It was a pile of one-pound notes.

Neither of them spoke. She was crying softly. He shrugged

his shoulders. The meal passed and she was still weeping, the tears drowning her eyes and coursing down her cheeks without her seeming aware of them. Her gaze was fastened on her plate. Whenever he looked at her, there was a pang in his heart, yet he could not discover in what way he had hurt her, or why she was surrendered to this inexplicable sorrow.

It pained him, and gradually his sense of guilt became heavy. All his buoyancy left him. A feeling of frustration fell on him, like something oppressive, afflicting his good humour. He got up, and as he passed her on his way out, he touched her gently. She edged away immediately.

It was the same at tea, and later at supper. Her tears had ceased, but her eyes were red and full of a pensive, unhappy look, too remote for him to fathom. He himself felt depressed, and in need of cheerful company. He wondered what she had done with the money, but he dared not ask her or broach that subject in any way. He dressed himself and left the place.

When he returned, shortly before midnight, he guessed that she had not been out. She was reading before the fire, but before he had time to speak to her, the child began to cry, and Kit hastened upstairs to her.

He could hear her talking soothingly to Lettie. "Sh, there. Go to sleep, darling. Shut your eyes and go to sleep."

He listened for a while before turning out the light and bolting the place and going upstairs.

They undressed in silence and got into bed. For a moment their bodies were stretched beside each other, perfectly still, then he put his arm across her and rested his hand on her breast. She turned quickly and nestled against him, her own arms folded about him. She was crying, and for a long time she would not answer his whispered entreaties. But at last her sobs ceased. She was silent; and he fancied that in the darkness she had the same remote, reflective look in her eyes, as she had had earlier in the day. He knew that she was still awake, but he dared not speak. He waited for her to question him.

At last, in a tone which was strangely normal, she asked: "Why did you do it, Wal?"

"I don't know," he muttered. "I was going by the place. I don't know. I chanced it. It was luck. That safe wasn't locked. Luck!"

"But why . . . that's what I want to know . . . why did you do it?" And after a pause: "Why was it that the safe was open?"

He did not answer immediately. It seemed to her that he was trying to express something which he had never even troubled to examine in himself. But at last, slowly, then more quickly, more passionately, there came the whole story of his discontentment, his lack of prospects or opportunities, his frustration.

She listened patiently. She believed that she understood him during these moments. She pitied his weakness, his badly directed aspiration to a goal outside the dingy saloon and beyond the locality with its noises and smells. Even his vanity and greed did not seem unworthy during the long tale of his misery. It was merely a part of his restless, incalculable temperament which was coloured by absurd impulses, buoyed by hopes and plans far beyond achievement.

It was her own tale as well as his, and because of this she felt more than ever united to his existence. She had no compunction about telling him then of her debt to Pilleger.

"What had we better do?" she asked finally.

"You take the money and pay Pilleger what you owe him. After that . . ."

"What?" she asked, hopefully.

"I don't know. We'll think it out and find a way. I'll take a saloon over in the West Ward. We'll shift over there."

His words droned on for a long while. It was only when she awoke in the morning that she realised that the two of them had not found a single solution to their predicament. They were merely united in their guilt. He had stolen money, and she had condoned the theft because she needed money to pay Pilleger. Beyond that, nothing had dawned for them, no avenue of hope or release. The same daily round was before them.

She was troubled. How innocent and attractive her life of yesterday seemed to her as she recalled its hours before the shadow of this guilt had darkened it!

VI

And that night Lizzie Crane made another of her appearances in the locality. A policeman watched her from a doorway, wondering what trouble was already afoot to attract her.

She stood on the kerb, swaying, laughing loudly over a piece of news which did not make much sense as she repeated it to herself, but which seemed to hint at information of a more

astonishing and precise character than the jargon she was shouting.

"She's got the money! Got it at last! Got the money!" she screeched. The constable decided not to move her along. Money was in the air lately. Money had been in the safe at Glennett's. He edged back into the shelter of the door and hoped that the crowd which Lizzie had drawn around her would not notice him or prevent her words from reaching his ears. He could see her hatless head bobbing in a dance amidst the crowd. Men were shouting at her.

"Where's your old man, Lizzie?"

"You're drunk!"

"You're loopy!"

She took no notice. "Got the money! Got the money! Got the money to pay it off!" she shrieked.

"Pay what off? The wireless set?"

She reeled into the gutter and stood there convulsed with her own secret pleasure and the laughter it shook from her, her hands covering her face, her hair falling as usual in lank strands over her brow. She had knowledge which spoke to her in a louder and more insistent voice than that of the crowd. It nudged her ribs and tickled her. It was as warm and as friendly as a hundred friends gathered round her.

But the mob had a mind as well as a voice. It wanted to know something. "Who's got the money?" it asked, drawing closer to her.

Lizzie stopped laughing. Her hands fell from her face, leaving her misty eyes peering through a mesh of hair. The eyes of madness, of ignorance, of craft, of stupidity, gaping, and waiting to qualify her suspicion before she trusted them to brighten. She smiled widely, drawing in her lower lip beneath three or four broken teeth. Then she recognised someone in the crowd. A thin little man, Jimsey Jones, who was a broken sailor employed as a domestic servant by the proprietress of a boarding-house for sailors. She sidled up to him at once, plucked his arm, and drew him to her to whisper in his ear.

"That Mrs. Kobling," she told him. "Mrs. Kobling. She's got the money."

She broke away again and began to dance, quite silent now.

"What she say?" the crowd asked Jimsey.

"Tell you she's loopy! Couldn't make out a word. Tell you she's off her 'ead! Couldn't 'ear a word!" He shook his head like wisdom itself sitting in judgment on her.

"Got the money at last! She's got it at last!" she suddenly began again.

The crowd's temper quickened. Money was in the news.

"Show us it, then! Who is she? Tell us!"

Lizzie made a clumsy effort to halt in the middle of a caper. She lurched. She stared about her as if she had just come out of a trance.

"Who is she? Show us the money! How do you know?" she heard from all sides.

She shook her head. "I ain't got it! Never got a penny of it! Never seen it!" she declared.

She saw hundreds of faces turned towards her. The spectacle hurt her, frightened her. She felt indignant at the way she was surrounded. She made a movement with her hands, and spoke. What she said was in the vernacular of the locality. It was in the nature of a defence. It had all the force she could give it. It was an exclamation of frank startling obscenity, and it had an immediate effect. The crowd stopped threatening her, and drew back, leaving a little lane for her to pass through as she advanced. She had nothing more to tell them.

The constable came out from his vantage point and cleared the pavement. He wanted to separate Jimsey Jones from the mob, because he knew that little Jones had the secret. He wanted to separate this grain from the chaff, and extract from the grain the breath which Lizzie had given it. But when he ploughed through the crowd there was no sign of Jimsey. Nevertheless, money was still news, still in the air.

Next evening Lizzie Crane appeared again. She was drunk. She had visited several bars and taken a double whiskey each time. She pushed her way through the doors and marched boldly to the counter, slapping down a new pound note into the swills from the glasses. Silence spread from her, rippling far away to the corners of the bar and the cribs. It puzzled her. It happened whenever she entered a pub. Even the bar-men seemed dumb and surprised. She glared around her. Then, like a wave rebounding on her, there came a roar of laughter.

Both her eyes were blacked, and there was a purple bruise on her left cheek. Her upper lip was cut, and a dark clot of congealed blood covered it almost completely. Her whole face was swollen. Anger, surprise, good humour, lost themselves amidst the bruises and cuts and puffy flesh before ever they reached a visible surface of expression. But she waved

her hand and beckoned people around her. She screeched for drinks and slapped down another pound as the chorus of laughter swelled on all sides. She led a little procession from bar to bar. Until, at the ninth pub, the Police were waiting for her.

They tried to take her quietly from the mob. Up came her arms, threshing against the hand of law and order, her body barging the constables, her abuse quick and voluble. She was very drunk. And disorderly. She bit and scratched and kicked, but they got hold of her at last, and whisked her expertly to custody in the local station.

There, when she had quietened, her cuts and bruises were dressed. She was offered a cup of strong tea, for they wanted her to talk; they wanted more than anything else to get her talking, so that they could learn before she sobered where she had got twenty-two pounds, besides the rest which she must have spent.

But she only snored. A loud sound, like that of the ocean sweeping a shingle beach. Two constables and a sergeant stood looking at her.

"Wait till she wakes up, the old reprobate," the Sergeant said, addressing one of the constables.

"All the money stuffed in her dress! Twenty pounds," the constable said. He was very young and ambitious, and was studying for promotion into the detective force. He had all sorts of interesting theories about the few crimes which were committed in the city, and on the Glennett Mill case his ideas had been astounding.

Lizzie stirred as he spoke. "Look at her!" he exclaimed. "She's the one we want. She's the one to watch. She went for her share, and the others beat her up, to teach her to be careful what she says. We ought to listen carefully to her when she wakes up."

But she had nothing to tell them. She sat up and gazed about her, wondering where she was and how she had come here. They tried to coax information from her. They showed her the money. "It's yours, Lizzie. How did you get it?"

She took it and stared at it. "What's it for?"

"It's yours. You had it when we brought you in last night."

"It's not mine!" she declared. "And I don't remember coming here."

"You were brought in drunk and disorderly. You're to go before the Bench to answer the charge. Drunk and disorderly, assaulting the Police in the execution of their duty, creating a disturbance."

"It's a insult! A insult! You let me go home. I don't want any of your money!"

"Who gave you this money?"

"You did!"

"Come on, Lizzie. Speak the truth!"

She began to blubber. "I'm a poor woman. It's a insult."

"Last night, before you got drunk, where were you?"

"I can't remember. I want to go home."

"What's your name?"

"Miss Crane. I got 'eadache."

"What's your address?"

"You turns up past the Rope Walk, and three doors past the gate with the wicked word on it what the boys painted and old Colvert tried to rub out but the boys wrote up again. . . ."

"What word?"

"Find out!"

"What's the name of the street?"

"It ain't got a name. It's not a street neither. It's got a lamp-post and a dead dog. Poisoned. Its teeth shows."

They looked at one another and grinned. She was hopeless.

Later that morning she was brought before the magistrates. Laughter smouldered all over the court immediately she came in. The Bench gaped. Lizzie gaped back, then bowed and turned to the public gallery to acknowledge the giggles with a vast, simpering leer which stretched her face into inhuman lines.

The laughter began to rise again as she stood in the dock and listened to the charge. Her puffy smile, topped by those two outraged organs from which her bloodshot pupils appeared, was almost terrifying.

"... twenty-sixth appearance on charges of a similar nature," the Sergeant declared.

The Chairman leaned forward. "Is the accused represented?"

Represented by the public behind her, who began to snigger as she bowed. The snigger grew louder and moved across the court and up to the Bench, confusing justice. The Clerk below, already drowned in it, sat with his hand spread widely over his face. The police witnesses went red. Something was coming, and unless the case continued quickly, nothing could prevent an uproar.

Then the Bench turned to Lizzie. Its justices smiled faintly at her. It was like a signal. Somebody burst into a wild cackle up in the public gallery, and immediately one concerted roar of laughter swelled in the air and deluged the court.

making the magistrates retire to consider the case, and leaving Lizzie in possession until the ushers had gone about and done their work.

The Bench returned at last and gave their verdict. Case dismissed. The public laughed. Lizzie bowed and departed. The Police withdrew to their station, disgruntled. Something had gone wrong. A week in prison would have done Lizzie good. She might have talked, made a confession, said something that would have made the way clear for an arrest.

Three days passed. The Police were angry and nonplussed. They had lost the scent and were beginning to feel ridiculous. Then one morning, less than a week after the robbery, the Inspector in charge of the case came into possession of fresh information, which necessitated a call upon Pilleger the draper.

"You're Mr. Pilleger?"

"That's right. What can I do for you?"

The Inspector told him who he was, and went on: "The day before yesterday you made a lodgment of some one-pound notes to your bank?"

He was a tall man, thick and active, in middle age. He looked unhappy and irritated, his unvarying, cross expression giving the draper an impression of responsibility turned sour and burdensome in him. At the mention of one-pound notes Pilleger became uneasy. What troubled him more was the fact that the question contained an accusation.

"I do so nearly every day," he replied.

The Inspector continued in the same unhappy tone in which he had first spoken. "You lodged seventy pounds, in notes, amongst others." He looked at Pilleger as if the latter had given him cause for extreme grief.

"But would you mind telling me . . ." Pilleger began.

"Do you happen to know where those notes came from?"

The draper frowned. "Why, from my customers, of course!"

"No," said the Inspector, "they did not!" Very emphatically: "From Glennett's. They were part of the batch stolen from Glennett's!"

"Well!" Pilleger exclaimed softly.

"Serious matter, Mr. Pilleger."

"Oh, I agree. I quite agree."

"Can you offer any explanation as to how you came by them?"

"I wish," Pilleger declared, "I wish you would stop talking to me as if I were the thief. It's most humiliating for me."

As I said before, I suppose the notes came from my customers. I'm afraid that's all I can tell you."

The Inspector did not reply immediately. Pilleger thought that the little amount of information he had given him would prove so useless to him that he would not waste more time by putting further questions. But he settled himself before the draper as if he were preparing for a very long interview. Also, he seemed very much more cheerful than at first.

"Doesn't help us very much at all, Mr. Pilleger."

"No; it doesn't, on the face of it."

"You don't happen to have a customer who owed you seventy pounds? Seventy-four pounds, to be exact."

"No . . ." Pilleger returned slowly, as if he were stirring his memory. "No . . ." He shook his head. But memory had stirred to some purpose. He remembered. He recollected something about buttons, brown buttons, quickly. And an outburst about money which would be paid without fail. And the occasion, quite recently, when the money had been paid. And Lizzie Crane, shouting outside his shop. He was startled. He was cold with fright.

"Well . . . this seventy pounds . . ."

"You see, Inspector, I have so many credit accounts. Not very large ones, because I don't let my customers run credit too high. If any payment is made, it's usually on a Friday or Saturday, when money is a good deal more plentiful hereabouts than on other days."

The Inspector nodded. He was smiling a thin, chilly smile. Too thin and too derisive. The sort of smile which is given to a transparent falsehood or an attempt to evade an issue.

"Customers come in and pay a pound, ten shillings, five shillings, and tender a note."

The Inspector went on smiling. He had something more to amuse him than this remark. He knew something.

"Now do you see, Inspector?"

"Doesn't get us far, Mr. Pilleger. Seems queer to me. Only thing I can think of, only explanation I can give is that whoever committed the robbery up at the Mill came through this district and gave seventy of your customers a quid each."

"Yes, ha! ha! That's good, yes. Something like that," Pilleger agreed.

The Inspector rose. His smile was wide and frank now. Yet Pilleger was still afraid of him, still suspicious. Whatever genial expression came on the Inspector's face, something else went on in the mind behind it.

"Of course, Inspector, if you care to, you can look over my ledgers," Pilleger suggested. "If that would help."

"Wouldn't help us much, thanks. Unless you happen to have a customer who owed you seventy pounds or more?"

Pilleger shook his head.

"I'll call again, if you don't mind. If we think you can help us."

"Very well. If you think. Good night, Inspector."

The door closed. Pilleger was frightened and angry and apprehensive. He had let himself become entangled in this robbery. He had been made a fool of, and he wanted release and revenge.

But after that the affair passed out of public attention. The Press had nothing more to say about it, because the Police were unable to offer news of fresh developments. So the crime remained unsolved. All the threads which had seemed to offer possibilities of clues had suddenly ended. The pattern could not be woven; and gradually the threads themselves were lost. The Police admitted that the affair had been hidden underground.

The barber and his wife, Kit, discussed it whenever they were alone, but chiefly at that quiet hour when they had retired for the night.

"Pilleger knows. He must know by now," she whispered.

"And Lizzie Crane," he said.

Some nights it rained. A murmurous thunder of raindrops on the roof, on the earth of the little garden, on the puddles in the yard, and on the corrugated-iron shed. Sometimes it was windy. Wind blowing from the sea, booming through the darkness, coming up the estuary and speeding across the city and carrying with it the sound of ships' sirens or the rattle of anchor-chains through the windlasses. Or there was calm, with neither wind nor rain beneath the immense silence and space which held the stars. Or mist rising from the sea and invading the city.

But no matter what the weather, what subtle change of wind or progression of the equinox towards autumn, there was no apparent change in the lives of the Koblings. Nevertheless, they were conscious of the expansion of a new circumstance, one which had never been in their hopes but had evolved from the theft and the use they had made of part of the money.

They tried to reassure each other.

"I paid him back all the money I owed him. I'm clear of

him now. It's over now," she said. And: "I gave her a clout that'll make her keep quiet," he said.

But still, they could not be sure. Pillegger and Lizzie Crane. They could not be sure what they would do.

VII

The genius which shapes and controls the destiny of an empire has its distorted counterpart in the pitiable being whose chance has swung past beyond reach or not come at all, whose last shilling is always in his pocket, whose whole life has always been lived from moment to moment and never in a stride of crammed hours.

Jimsey Jones was in the last category. He had been sent home from Buenos Aires as a Distressed British Seaman off a tramp steamer, to be operated upon and allowed to convalesce before being found a menial billet in a large dockside boarding-house owned by Mrs. Most. He was small, meek, pale-tempered, without lustre or determination. He ran and fetched and carried; he swept and polished, bolted doors, unbolted them, gossiped the affairs of the port to his employer. He was unhealthy and insignificant. Nobody sought his friendship, because he had nothing to afford in friendship. He did not warm to anyone, all his sociability passing into nothingness after the few greetings with men in the house. He had little to grant others, and actually nobody expected much from him. He was pitied. He was so poor in every way. And yet to himself he was whole, unique, significant. He had a profound conviction that he was in the category of the genius who guides the destiny of an empire.

He believed in himself, and his faith had worked not one miracle but a hundred, whereby all the disgusting menialities of his employment were transformed in his imagination until they became like the responsibilities of one in authority. He saw himself as a person of importance in the house, indispensable to the place. And issuing from this self-esteem there were larger fancies, bold and majestic as clouds above him. He sent forth his little shout at them, hoping for the blessedness of rain from their shapes, or light when his life was tedious, or shade when he was tired. He felt them near him always as benignant presences, large, unseen, and amiable.

But in the press his little shout—his shilling bet, his sixpenny football pool from his weekly fifteen shillings—was no more capable of making an audible noise than a wisp of smoke

curling from a chimney. He believed, but did not clamour. He called, but was not vociferous enough. The measure of his vitality, the force of his spirit, were rewarded only with pale dreams. He was too insignificant to merit the reality of those dreams. The vessel receives only to its capacity.

Unless, out of sudden, unaccountable liberality fate pours a flowing measure, or heeds a softly uttered prayer, or guides an aimless life. As, for instance, when, instead of spending his evening off at a cinema in the lower end of Kepnor Road, Jimsey walked northwards.

That was on the night following the report of the robbery at Glennett's Mill. That was when he encountered Lizzie Crane.

Outside a public-house half-way along Kepnor Road, he pushed his way through a crowd and came face to face with her. He knew her slightly, and his timid soul shivered at the parallel which vaguely suggested itself to him whenever he saw her. Friendless, derided, a figure of squalor, a being on the brink of destitution. And he was separated from her only by fifteen shillings a week and his nebulous fancies, which, at such moments as this, always receded, leaving him exposed to all sorts of doubts. She knew his name, and often hailed him.

"Jimsey! I want to tell you something!"

But he never stayed to listen.

He saw now that she was drunk. He did not know why, but he felt some sort of responsibility for her. It angered him. She was old enough, cunning enough, to look after herself. Yet, as the mob closed in on her his anger changed quickly to a large fear for her safety.

He stood watching her and listening to her rigmarole. He detected the dangerous temper of the hooligans around her when she tantalised them with glimpses of the secret she held. He knew what would happen to her before long. Panic took him, and he tried to back out from the mob.

He only succeeded in drawing attention upon himself as men thrust him away from them. Then Lizzie recognised him. She sidled up to him at once and whispered her secret to him.

"That Mrs. Kobling. She's got the money, Jimsey."

He grinned. What she had said was nothing more than one of her foolish pieces of gossip. She reeled away, leaving him standing in the centre of the mob. He was no longer afraid for her. Nobody wanted to listen any longer to her. It was to him that the crowd turned. Everybody closed in about him.

"What she say? Who's got the money?"

He went on grinning. "Never 'eard what she said. Tell you, she's loopy," he said. His heart fluttered and leaped against his ribs. Cold terror drove all thoughts of Lizzie's secret from his mind. A more immediate problem engaged him.

Somebody gripped his arm. "Come on, you, Jimsey . . ." In a growling undertone: "What she say?" Someone else clouted him from behind. "Don't be funny. Tell us what she said!"

He could not speak. Words had never been a means of defence with him. The only defence he had was that of all timid, small animals. He had great speed of foot, and he was seeking a chance to use it.

He wrenched his arm free. This was a free country! But the bullies surrounded him, cajoling, menacing him, a threat in their invitation.

"What's up, Jimsey? Not goin' to leave us? Come on. Come and 'ave a drink."

His terror deluged him, soaking into every particle of him. He hardly felt the kicks and blows which fell on him. His body was nothing but the substance of fear, trembling in their hands, palpitating like something taut and flexed for flight.

"Hit 'im! Give 'im one if he won't tell!"

"Come on, out with it, you little wart you, Jimsey!"

"All right. Las' chance! Las' chance! After this, if you won't say who's got the money . . . after this . . ."

He found his tongue at last. "What money?"

"The money what was lifted from Glennett's, you fool!"

He laughed. "I ain't got it! Take me for a bleedin' thief? Think I'd do a thing like that?"

They let go of him and looked at one another in silence. The crowd behind parted and dispersed as a constable approached. The bullies scattered. For a moment Jimsey stood free; next instant he fled towards a near-by market stall. From that vantage point he had dozens of barriers behind which his nimble body could dart, could hide and turn and double back. He had a genius for this form of retreat. His fearful spirit was, and always had been, adept at this game. His fright provoked a streak of cunning in him which flew before him, guiding his swift steps, telling him where his pursuers were, what they would do, where they would look. Beneath the naphtha flares guttering in the night breeze hundreds of people were passing. He was small and agile; his pursuers were big men, to whom speed in that thronged place was an impossibility.

He tore along for half a mile, paused then against a wall, and peered cautiously from beneath the brim of his cap at people passing him. He drew breath, finally setting off again, this time making a wide detour which brought him almost to the western boundary of the Ward and brought him back at last to the lower end of Kepnor Road. He was safe here. He had only to raise a shout hereabouts and bring to him in response a strolling sailor from the docks who would recognise him.

He halted and leaned against a wall. He was tired, but something was glowing in him, beginning to fill him with elation which was too precious to be savoured in so public and impersonal a place as this street. He felt it swelling like music in his mind, like grand words whose sense admitted visions like those promised by the Communist orators who spoke near the quays every Saturday night.

He had taken a cigarette-butt from his pocket and lit it. He puffed once at it, and threw it away. Then he made off in the direction of the boarding-house.

Five minutes later he was in his room at the top of the house. He removed his boots and stretched himself on his bed. He wanted to reflect on the events of the evening and reach a conclusion about the information which Lizzie had given him. It was important. There was something in it.

"This 'ere is a matter of gravity," he told himself. And again he felt swept by a belief that his uneventful life was lit at last by a spark, was already taking fire.

"This means something. It's a big thing. It spells Chris' knows what. She said . . . she said: 'That Mrs. Kobling . . . she's got the money, Jimsey.' Been a lot of talk about money since that Glennett affair. But what she mean? Kobling. Mrs. Kobling?"

It was like following an elusive light in the darkness. It fascinated him. Things began to take shape in his mind as he pondered, but still he could not discover the whole structure. It tired him. Ten minutes later he was snoring.

His problem followed him into slumber. It was beside him in all his fantastic dreams. It loomed above him, like a presence, filling his dream-sight, its garments flowing about his feet. He ventured to touch them, and discovered that they were smooth as warm silk. That thrilled him. He felt contented, as if the character of the presence was already discovered by him.

Upon waking he felt the presence beside him still, exciting him. In that first moment before his sensibilities gathered

once more the murky monotony of his life, the thing was large and comforting. Then with mournful suddenness it dissolved. He was awake. He yawned, filled his lungs, and stretched his limbs. He began to remember. And there, shining like a lost gem, was the answer to his problem.

"Kobling stole that money from Glennett's," he told himself.

Momentarily, the phrase seemed nothing but a wild surmise, but gradually it assumed feasibility. He began to mutter:

"I've 'eard of Kobling. Some nasty things about him. A nasty bit of work, that chap, so they say. But the thing is: how did Lizzie get to know about the money? That's what I want to know. This is going to be a big thing. There's a lot in this business. I got to see her. I'll get round and find her. Pop round to-day, some time. Lizzie, come 'ere a tick."

VIII

But all that day, and far into the following one, he was unable to find time to get out. Two vessels had docked from the Argentine and Russia, one with a cargo of meat, the other loaded with timber. The house was full, the majority of the crews having come to Mrs. Most's house. They were a hungry, noisy lot, and he was kept busy from dawn to midnight running up and down stairs.

Everything went wrong the moment they came to the house. One of the cooks complained of sickness and went to bed. An orderly had a violent dispute with one of the sailors and ended the argument with a broom. In the absence of the manager, Mrs. Most came downstairs and tried to settle the dispute. She failed, and having called loudly for the manager and got no response, began to shriek for Jimsey.

For the first time since he had entered her employment he did not answer her. He was upstairs in his room, sitting on his bed with his head between his hands, dazed by the noise and confusion and the pressure of his secret and the prospects which seemed about to open in his monotonous existence.

"Jimsey! Jimsey! At once! Here, at once!"

He took his hands from his head. "No use, no use you hollerin' at me. I'm all sixes and sevens. I'm broadside on, and adrift. I got somethin' on my mind. If I don't get half an hour's peace to sort it out, I'll sink," he murmured.

Gradually, the noise below subsided. He relaxed then. Nevertheless, his own problem did not abate; and all day he moaned, sighed, wandered upstairs when he should have gone

to the basement, or trudged to the basement when he wanted something from upstairs.

"Didn't you hear me shouting for you?" Mrs. Most demanded.

"I heard. I called out back to you. Couldn't drop what I was doin', ma'am."

"I called a dozen times. You could have heard me at the Rainley Dock!"

"Sorry, ma'am. But why didn't you give them blokes a good bashin'? That's the way to deal with them. That's what Mr. Kelly does to settle things. . . ."

"Mr. Kelly! Huh! He was out. You men! I might have been murdered! Murdered!"

Let her whine, Jimsey thought, as he took the reprimand and watched her great figure sail down the passage. What she got to moan about? Look at me! What she do if she had my worries?

He slept badly that night, and awoke feeling depressed by his inability to get to the bottom of his problem.

"Thing's on my nerves. Thing's drivin' me mad. If I can't get this off my mind," he told himself as he slushed cold water over his body and towelled himself, "I'll go off my nut."

It was worse than yesterday. It obsessed him and made him do foolish things. Twice during the morning, he left the house and went in search of Lizzie. He knew the lane in which she lived. He hurried through it from end to end on both occasions, keeping a look-out for her, even knocking at a door in the vain hope that she might live in that house. Nobody answered the knock. He asked several people where she was. They did not know. Couldn't say. Didn't know her. Had never heard of her.

He hurried back to his work. He was in a frenzy of impatience; and as the hours passed, what was in his mind underwent terrifying changes, impatience giving place to despair, and despair to terror, which in his disorganised imagination took one shape after another, the last always being more horrible than its forerunner, the whole passing like a prophetic warning of doom which filled his tiny soul with dread.

"Money was stolen from the mill. Kobling knows something about it. So does his wife. And Lizzie. So do I. I know what Lizzie said, and she knows something about Mrs. Kobling. The Police want to know, and so do them fellows in Kepnor Road. Things'll happen about this. If the Police

thought I knew something, they might take me up over it. So I got to know what it's all about, and where I stand, where we all stand. I got to find Lizzie. And there might be more than all this. Might be a big chance in it."

Then at five o'clock he was free. He made at once for the lane. He almost shouted with relief when, having gone only a dozen paces in that murky place, he saw her coming towards him. But what a spectacle she was!

Both her eyes were hidden beneath puffy, bruised flesh. On her cheeks there were cuts and more bruises, and on her upper lip there was a gash already black with congealed blood. To all of these hurts she occasionally put up a slow hand, touching them tenderly and wincing at once from contact.

"Lizzie! What you been doin'?"

She tried to grin at him. The pain from that slight movement snatched the breath from her and delayed her reply. She leaned against the wall, dumb, her body trembling as she sobbed.

"What's up? Where you been? Somebody hit you?"

"It was Mr. Kobling," she mumbled.

"What did he do?"

"I says, give me a couple of coppers for a cup of tea, mister, and he says, ho, blackmail is it, and you been saying things about my wife, so I'll give you a million cups of tea." She pulled a handful of notes from her pocket. "He gives me this. There you are, he says, and if you say another word about my wife. . . . And I says I never. I never said a thing. Yes, you did, he says. And he starts in on me. Come round 'ere again and you'll get another lot." She put her hand to her face as her words ceased.

Jimsey was looking at the money in her hand.

"Why, you got thirty or forty quid there!"

He drew her back into the shadow of the nearest entry and resumed in a whisper, thankful that she was sane and sober.

"You got a lot o' money there. You look out. Tell you, you better keep that lot out of sight. Tell you, you better keep quiet about it."

"Here, that's for you, mister," she said, carefully extracting two of the notes and presenting them to him.

"Wha' for?"

"For you, of course!"

"No, no. I don't want it. No." He was shaking his head.

"Don't be so proud, Jimsey!"

"Tell you it ain't pride!"

"Stinkin' pride!"

"No. It's where it come from, that's why."

"Where it come from? Me! And I'm as good as you!"

He cut her short to explain, and resumed: "I want to ask you somethin'. I want to get this right. It's been on my mind. So listen. When I saw you last you whispers to me something about Mrs. Kobling. Something about got the money. What I want to know is this 'ere. What money?"

She smiled and began to sway to a tune running through her mind. "She'll pay, that Mrs. Kobling," she muttered. She went on swaying her body from side to side. "She'll pay the money! She's got it. . . ."

"What money?" he demanded, restraining her.

"The money she said she had!" she returned.

"What? Told you she had?"

"No. What she told that Mr. Pilleger in the shop."

"Andy Pilleger in Kepnor Road? The draper?"

"Yes, when I was in there. . . ."

"What happened?"

"I went in there, and she and Mr. Pilleger was talkin', and she shouts out at him that she would pay because she had the money. . . ."

"So that's what it's all about," he exclaimed, slowly.

She saw that she had told him something he wished to learn. His silence now showed how he was piecing together certain information, and his pale little face gleamed with an excited look as his thoughts took flight towards a remote, remarkable prospect.

She nudged him. She wanted to share his knowledge.

"Jimsey! Tell me. Jimsey!"

She shook him, and whimpered petulantly, stamping her foot in chagrin. "What is it? I want to know, Jimsey!"

Her free hand clawed in her blouse and brought out another note, which she clapped into his hands.

He shook her off. "No, I don't want any more," he murmured.

"Jimsey, what's it all about? You tell me, go on. I told you, so now you tell me."

He bent towards her. "Lizzie, the money what was stolen from Glennett's. . . ."

"It was in the papers," she broke in. "Go on. . . ."

"I'm going to tell you something, and don't you tell anyone else a word of it. If you let the cat out o' the bag, your life won't be worth a penny, round 'ere. So, keep quiet. . . ."

"Go on, Jimsey. . . ."

"That money you got there," he said, pointing to her blouse, "and what you've given me a bit of; that money come from Glennett's. It's what was stolen. And the person what stole it was Kobling."

She was staring hard at him, but because of the disfiguration of her features, her face was as empty of expression as a piece of meat on a butcher's slab. He waited for her to speak.

"Oh, that," she said slowly. "I knew that. I thought you was going to tell me something, Jimsey."

For a moment he was nonplussed. He was flustered by the fact that all along she had had that remarkable knowledge.

"So you knew?" he asked, recovering himself.

"Knew what?"

"About Kobling."

"Not until he give me this lot, to-day."

"No wonder he give you such a lot, Lizzie. He wants to get rid of you. And he wants to get rid of the money. These notes is all new. The numbers is all known. So you look out what you do with your lot. And I'll tell you another thing, Lizzie. You take care to keep out of Kobling's way. A lot of things is going to happen to him from now on. The Police'll be watching him, keepin' a watch on him for good, and anyone who gets near him, except for 'aircut or shave, is coming under suspicion too. So look out. See? Mind, now. Not a word. You keep to yourself, and say nothin' like me. Me and you knows a lot. Mustn't say a word, though . . ."

"That's right, Jimsey. Me and you."

"We knows all about it now."

"That's it." She contrived to smile at him.

"So long, then."

"Bye, Jimsey!"

He watched her go, then he slid along in the shadows and moved cautiously from the lane, like a little shadow himself, a small thing floating on the darkness of the evening and passing in and out of the dim light of successive street lamps; the spark of his life drawing nearer, as he knew it was, to a greater flame, a vortex of heat which might consume him or just as conceivably grant him greater life.

He had nowhere in particular to go, but he knew that his steps were taking him towards Kepnor Road. He turned into it three turnings below Kobling's saloon. He saw where he was, still he went on, his pace becoming slower until he halted

outside the barber's place. He trembled slightly, but it was all right, he was sure no harm would come to him.

He wanted to taste the power of his secret. Already his little piece of information was better to him than the effects of a drink. It transcended all the pleasures he could think of. It was pure pleasure, its effect never decreasing or staling, the mere possession of it affording him one soaring joy after another. The greatest of them was his pride in his knowledge. He did not stop to consider how he had come by the information. He could only realise that it had placed him in an advantage over the redoubtable barber.

That indeed was wonderful to him. In the space of one day he had become important. He was a person of consequence. He had in his possession information which the Police would have been grateful to have, which Kobling would have feared. It was shut away, stored in his mind for future use.

But at present he did not wish to turn it to account or ponder its possibilities, for such steps constituted problems, and of these he had had enough. All he wished to do at this time was to taste his power. It was wealth to him, and like a miser he wanted to enjoy it.

Actually, it was the equivalent of the last shilling, the proverbial coin whose expenditure he could not have contrived sensibly. He knew it the moment he entered the saloon.

He sat in a chair opposite a mirror. The boy swathed the cloth round him. He said nothing. Kobling was finishing service to another customer. In a few moments he would come across, stand over him, speak to him, touch him, putting his fingers on the head to facilitate the use of the scissors. And in that head there was information which threatened the barber's freedom. Surely he would detect it the moment he came near. Or that little piece of knowledge, pulsing in the brain and being too weighty, too sharp for the substance which confined it, would articulate in some way.

Under the cloth which covered him, Jimsey gripped the arms of the chair. His feet pressed the stool on which they rested. He was shivering when Kobling turned towards him with comb and scissors poised.

"Why, Jimsey . . ."

He felt the barber's personality encircle him, strike his own personality with an impact which cowed him. Gone were his dancing thoughts, his pride. His elation was dead, and the prospects which it had flung open to him were arid. What he had previously relished had suddenly turned bitter to his taste.

Bitter, too, was the knowledge that he had overestimated his powers.

Above him, his breath lightly brushing his skull; around him, his fingers touching his head, his body sometimes leaning against his elbow, the barber's powerful body moved. Jimsey felt it like something potent beyond all his judgment, and the mind which controlled it, far beyond all his experience of men and the minds of men.

He was awed, subjected. Something in that presence addressed his own meagre personality, joined conflict with him and overpowered him effortlessly, not once but at every moment Kobling spoke and he replied.

He learned his own place as a personality, and became a menial again, robbed of his pride and mocked for his daring. Then he knew that the possession of his secret was of no use to him. He could not utilise his knowledge, dared not. His spirit acknowledged its inferiority to this bold, gusty character which swept past him in a stride which he could never match. He became awed, timid.

"You're Jimsey Jones, aren't you?"

"That's right, mister."

"Long time since I last saw you."

"Never knew, mister, that you 'ad seen me before."

"I never forget a face."

"I can't remember when you might have seen me."

"But I remember you."

"Where was it, mister?"

"You used to wear a brown cap. Dark blue tie. Before you wore this reefer jacket and peaked cap."

"I can't remember exactly . . ." Jimsey murmured.

"And you had a ring on the third finger of your right hand. A signet ring."

"That's right, mister. One time, I wore a ring. The brown cap, though. . . . I can't think when I wore a brown cap."

"I can remember."

"When was it? Where? . . ."

Kobling did not reply. He went on trimming Jimsey's hair, keeping a lofty silence like one whose mind cannot stay to listen to small questions.

"First time you've been here, isn't it?" he said. It was less a question than a statement. But a dangerous statement for Jimsey, who gathered its true meaning.

"You're right, mister. First time. I don't get this far often."

"Except about three or four times a week, when I see you going by?"

"About that," Jimsey admitted, fearfully.

"Been a bit of trouble round here lately."

"Trouble? I never 'eard . . ." Jimsey began.

"Robbery up at Glennett's."

"Was there?"

Again Kobling was silent and meditative. His strong hands moved Jimsey's head this way and that as he worked the scissors.

"Ever seen a thief, Jimsey?" he asked.

"Ho! Seen plenty! Seen a bloke once what stole some money from a bank. Seen another chap that 'ad a fight over a girl with a gaucho in the Boca, and got stabbed. Chap got stabbed."

The barber said nothing.

"Yes, seen another chap . . ."

"You've got two crowns on your head, Jimsey," Kobling interrupted. "Sign of inquisitiveness. Shows a lack of caution."

"What? Me, inquisitive?"

"It isn't a virtue," Kobling said. "It's a sort of flaw, and might lead to serious consequences."

"Nothing like that about me, mister."

"Two crowns means poking your nose into what doesn't concern you. So if I were you, Jimsey, I'd take care."

"I always mind my own business, mister."

Kobling swept off the cloth from him with a grand, adroit flourish, after the style of a *torero* handling the *capa*.

"But you got two crowns, Jimsey," he said, emphatically.

Jimsey grinned to hide his confusion. He knew that he had been warned. Kobling had perceived his errand and had known how to humiliate him.

But there was some revenge for him, something left by fortune, something which he might flash in answer in the same subtle way in which the barber had revealed his discovery.

"Mister, I got nothin' 'cept a quid note. Nothin' smaller. I'm sorry." And with a slick little gesture which in its way almost equalled the flamboyant skirl Kobling had made with the sheet, he tendered a pound note. One which Lizzie had given him. One which Lizzie had got from Kobling, and which Kobling had stolen from Glennett's. One of his own pigeons come back to him!

"A quid note! A nice new one!" the barber exclaimed. He held it while he looked for change in his till.

"No change. Not enough silver there. Been a run on silver, Jimsey; so you can keep your quid."

He passed back the note, and smiled slyly.

"You can keep that one, Jimsey, and pay me a tanner when you come in again."

"Thanks, mister. One on the slate," Jimsey laughed.

"That's it. One on the slate. Good night!"

Out in the Road again, Jimsey walked a few paces, then came to a halt. Like pain returning to flesh that had been numbed, his humiliation recurred. He tried to forget it. He needed to rehabilitate his lost self-esteem, put something in the balance against his experience with the barber.

He walked on a little way and entered the first bar. He ordered a whiskey and put down one of his notes. The barman brought the drink and change a moment later. Jimsey lifted the glass in one hand and the silver in the other. Almost as soon as the money had fallen into his pocket, he had put the glass to his lips and swallowed the contents.

The drink warmed his throat first, then gradually it put a glow throughout his body. He ordered another whiskey and drank it like the former. The effect was wonderful. The restraints which disciplined his sober character were melted by this heat which spread along his veins; and new visions, new impulses moved proudly into his life. He left the bar and wandered along the Road.

In his slow journey back to the district in which he lived, he stopped thus four times. He had changed his three notes, and his pockets were now heavy with silver which he jingled as he walked. When he reached a corner not far from the boarding-house, he stopped, pushed his peaked cap to the back of his head, stuck his hands into the pockets of his reefer jacket. He had a great longing for company. Drink had not only warmed his body, but engendered in his soul a faint affection for the world at large. Such moments were rare with him. There was nothing exuberant about him; he never overflowed. Now, however, he wanted someone to talk to. He had things to say. He was alive for the first time within years, and his loneliness at this wonderful moment was intolerable. He had money, time. He felt that his course was set.

He dug his hands into his pockets and lifted out the silver, pouring it carefully into one hand and counting it. It took him some time to do this. He made it out to be fifty-four

shillings and some coppers. That was a fortune! What could he not do with so much? The silver clinked in his hands. It made a sound like a little chord of music, reminding him of a toy musical-box whose sound was brief and melodious.

Standing in the light of a street lamp, he continued making that pleasant noise. It pleased him and eased his solitude, making a little echo in that quiet place, the wall behind him sending it back to him in a faint ripple which delighted him. He tried to make the sound louder by lifting the coins higher above the hand which received them.

All at once, one of them escaped his fingers and fell ringing on the pavement. He heard it strike the stone and give forth one clear note before it rattled away into the gutter. He clutched the others and hastily returned them to his pocket as he bent forward and hurried after the lost one. But not ten paces from him was a woman sauntering towards him and already bending to gather his coin for him. A young and pretty woman, coming from the stillness and shadows of the place, like something attracted to him by the sound his money had made, or perhaps by the desire in his heart for company and laughter and love.

He stood still and let her pick up the coin. He was watching her, thinking about her. As she leaned forward, he saw the shapes of her breasts, softly encircled by shadows; and as she came towards him he saw her brilliant eyes upon him, and noticed the smooth column of her neck rising from her shoulders.

She came close to him and held out the florin. Something intimate and alluring seemed to envelop his senses at once. He could feel her body against his, its warmth and fragrance subtle to his senses; her affability, too, just as engaging and purposeful. Nothing like this had ever happened before to him. No woman had ever accosted him, and certainly he had never hoped for one so young, so dainty, and willing.

"You better put this with all the others," she told him.

"I been lookin' for you," he said, disregarding the coin.

"For me?"

"Come on," he murmured, taking her arm and strolling off with her, "we'll buy a bottle of whiskey, then you can lead the way."

"It's not far," she said.

He was as much surprised and delighted by his self-assurance, as he was at her willing acceptance of his invitation.

At about eight o'clock on the following evening, the young constable who was studying for promotion into the detective force entered the Punter Athletic Club to spend half an hour there before returning to dress for duty at 10 p.m.

He made for the ring where a friendly bout was going on between two of the members, and stood with some of his acquaintances there. The fight was not impressive; it did not take his attention, and consequently his thoughts reverted to a subject which had engrossed him deeply for about a week. He remembered a very good maxim which he had read somewhere in connection with the detection of crime.

"Find the motive for the crime, and you have the best clue."

He repeated it several times. "But what," he thought, "what's the motive for stealing a bundle of notes from a safe? For walking into a place and lifting them? Greed? Covetousness? But even they aren't certain in this case, for half the Ward seems to have shared in the proceeds. No, not greed, but something else. Makes me think that we're on the wrong track. We've treated this crime as if it were just a step or two more important than petty larceny. I think there's more in it than that. Something important. Relatively important. I've got an idea that we ought to snap down on something quickly, if we're going to be in time."

He left the ringside, thinking that he would like a turn on the bars, or with the clubs, or a bout with the gloves himself if he could find someone to put them on against him. But it didn't look as if he would get a chance in the ring this evening, for several couples were waiting their turn before him.

There was more space and more chance of a bit of exercise in the adjoining smaller gymnasium. There, a fellow who was training for a sculling championship was doing work on a rowing machine. At the far side the bars were empty, but on a mat between, in the centre of the place, a dark, lithe chap in shorts was instructing another in ju-jitsu. They were doing a very tricky throw. The dark fellow did it twice, but in the opinion of the young constable he was clumsy about it. It was effective, but at its climax there was a lag of perhaps a quarter of a second, which made the whole exercise disjointed.

He stood nearby, watching until the lesson was over, then he approached the instructor and asked if the two of them could try that throw, because it seemed to him that either he

had learned it incorrectly or there was a better alternative which, perhaps, he could learn ~~now~~.

"All right, come on," Kobling said. "If you've got the thing wrong, I might be able to put you on the correct line, although I'm not so good that I can't learn myself from someone who can teach me."

"Thanks. I'll show you how I was taught it, first. Then we'll try it your way, and you can tell me where I'm wrong," the constable said.

But all the time, he knew he was right and that the fellow in shorts was wrong. They stood on the mat and tried it together. And at the instant when Kobling should have moved the balance of his body forward, and thrown his right shoulder a few inches upwards, thus jerking his opponent sideways and off balance, he failed to achieve the result, because in taking the other man by the left arm and swinging him round to get a hold on his right, he misjudged the expenditure of his own strength. He had breathed too late, and at the climax of the throw had found himself short of breath and tired.

It happened twice. Kobling was discomfited; he stood back, looking limp and puzzled. "We'll try it again," he said. "That's the first time I've missed that throw. Of course, you know how to do it, don't you?"

"Pretty well. But you should be able to bring it off, all the same."

"Unless all along I've had it wrong."

"I think you have," the constable said.

"We'll try it again," Kobling said curtly.

But again the exercise failed, and Kobling stepped back, trying to smile, shaking his head.

"It's his weight," he said conclusively, addressing the on-lookers. "His weight. And he knows the throw and sets himself against it."

The other interrupted at once. "Oh no! It's not altogether that. My weight shouldn't count as much as that. I'm a bare eleven stone. No. If you ask me, I think you make a pause in the throw, and that's fatal. What about trying it my way?"

"I don't mind," Kobling replied.

They stood on the mat again. When the constable made the move and caught Kobling's arms in two deft flashes, he felt his body like a hot, resistant column flexed against him. But he knew how to handle him. He knew how to throw that body; and in two seconds he had done it.

The barber, falling, thumped the mat and sprawled his limbs

in a ludicrous way because he still held his body stiffly to resist the throw. As he rose, his astonishment showed very plainly in his expression. He seemed ashamed, too. An air of defeat passed over him, and he seemed momentarily crest-fallen and out of humour. It passed quickly, and the young constable was the only one to notice it.

"Will you try it again?" Kobling ventured.

"If you like."

It was, seemingly, nothing but a repetition of the previous toss. Actually, it was an exposition of Kobling's character. He had said he would learn the correct way to do the exercise, but he had forgotten his intention under his shame at being thrown. His limbs, in the constable's quick grip, felt like vindictive, malignant things that had accepted this friendly challenge as something to be contested with all the spite he could summon. The other realised it, and got the whole thing over very quickly, leaving Kobling sprawled as before.

He had had enough of this fellow. He turned to take his coat from an onlooker. Then he saw Kobling get to his feet and stare furiously at him. He turned to meet him at once. He saw what had happened, and he thought: "This fellow is mad! He can't take a toss! He's coming at me to fight!"

He smiled grimly, side-stepped adroitly, caught Kobling by the shoulders, pressing his arms at points which crushed the muscles and ate into their strength. He held him locked like that. They were almost motionless, their bodies interlocked. Little of the struggle between them was visible.

"I'll throw him," the constable thought. "I'll break him like he deserves." But instead of doing this, he continued to hold him. It was less spectacular than what he had intended to do at first. It did not humiliate Kobling before the others, but it did humiliate him before himself, which was all the constable wanted to do. He fought him and overpowered him, merely by the pressure of his own strength against the angry power of the other, and let him go at last when he was limp and defeated.

To the men watching it was as if the two of them had parted from a grip which neither could bring to a throw. Kobling was pale. He ran his hand over his hair and smiled as he tossed back his head.

The constable took his coat and put it on. He did not smile. What had happened had been a new experience to him. He had imagined that he understood his fellow-men. Now he appreciated that beneath the surface of behaviour there were

all sorts of shabby, vindictive passions, moving slyly into the habits and motives of men. When he looked again at Kobling, he had the impression that beneath his smile and his movements there was an immeasurable violence beyond control at times such as recently when it had erupted.

It interested him. He wanted to ponder it. It was peculiar that the other men did not appear to have noticed it. They were talking to Kobling who stood there as if he, too, had not been aware of his own incredible behaviour. The constable felt that Kobling was attempting to hold him out of the conversation, so that it might appear to the other men that he was sulking. He joined them, therefore, and entered their talk.

He had little interest in it. All his attention was focused on Kobling, who presently let the conversation go and came round to say: "I think I've got that throw all right now. I can see where I'd gone wrong on it. You're in better trim than I am, aren't you?"

"Perhaps," the other said. "I have to keep up to scratch."

"Why, are you . . ."

"I'm in the police force."

"I thought you were," Kobling said.

They said good night to each other, and the constable left the club a few minutes later.

He had found a new and engrossing interest. "That fellow is an extraordinary man," he thought. "He's got a streak in him. Violent, impulsive. You couldn't calculate a fellow like that. I'm glad I didn't let him have it when he came at me after I'd dropped him. I'm glad I didn't floor him hard in front of Charlie and the others. There might have been a scene, and I'd have lost him. As it is, I've got him. I can come down and yarn with him and study him. He breaks rules."

X

What had happened at the Club had left Kobling in a bad mood which gradually opened his thoughts to a succession of gloomy conclusions as he walked home.

First of all he suffered a sting of resentment at the way in which he had been handled by the constable. He tried to wrench all memory of that scene from his mind, to exorcise his shame. It defied him. It had sunk its roots too far for him to find them. It went deeper still as he tried to pursue it.

In the whole of the affair he could not discover one good feature. That was the greater part of his ignominy: to know

that his behaviour had been altogether foolish and unworthy. Had he been able to tell himself that he had acted wisely, or as a good sportsman, although all along he had known that he was no match for the constable, he could have taken his defeat in better spirit. But from the moment the other had spoken to him he had realised that his whole behaviour was at fault, that his own method of performing the exercise was wrong, that he was deliberately risking defeat by not admitting that much, that the constable was his superior in every way. He had known all this at the time; it had not taken him more than a minute to appreciate it. Yet he had refused to concede that much, and had let his vanity control him. With this wretched result.

There was a tradition that to accept defeat, to take a blow or fall with a smile, was noble. It was a code which he had never been able to understand or follow. His character would not tolerate it. His spirit demanded satisfaction when it was hurt, and his pride boiled into anger at the least provocation. His whole temperament was always on the alert, tuned for conflict, restless, jealous.

It was like a weapon which he had never learned to handle skilfully. Somewhere between his possession of it, and the wisdom which should have come with it, there was a gulf, a lack of principles. He had been a fractious, difficult child; and in youth under stiff parental control he had loathed restraint. He knew that in intellect and physique he was superior to the men and youths around him, yet no chance was ever afforded him to prove this. He only knew that some day the barber's shop which his father owned, and in which he worked, would be his. Now, as an adult, he was free. He was his own master. The years were passing, and he wanted things: wealth, power, pleasures. He reached for them, but somehow they eluded him, leaving him shamed by his failure and frustration. His plans went wrong. Why, he could not discover. He built them with pride and courage and assurance, but they toppled every time. Yet, up and down the Road, lesser men, little chaps in trade, gambled and brought off their deals successfully. Was it because they were better equipped than he was? More daring, more farsighted? He had all their qualities in abundance. Why, then, why?

The answer was near enough to him; had he been more reasonable, more calm, he might have found it. He would have understood then that his failure was because of the violence which he put into all his plans, the pressure and

speed with which he pursued his affairs. As it was, he could not understand why he failed. He ascribed the latter to a streak of bad fortune. Until he had taken a bolder chance. For once, luck had favoured him. But only for a moment. And after that the same confusion had resulted.

Kit was waiting for him when he returned. She was the one constant factor in his life, so he imagined. He accepted her patience and devotion for months at a time, only to realise them with startling clarity after long periods such as the present one.

The one abiding thing which remained unhurt by proximity to him, he saw her as a focus from which he might venture again after his defeats and humiliations, as someone who understood him. And it never occurred to him that he was beyond her to determine, his character too uncertain in its flash and activity, his soul too complex, too violent for her to bring near her own.

He stood at the door and watched her. Her smile was quick, but it barely hid the anxiety which possessed her, and which he gathered the moment he saw her. He went over and took her in his arms.

If it were any sort of anxiety connected with his absence, or their child Lettie, or herself, he knew that his presence and this embrace would dispel it. But when at last he held her a little away from him, the shade was still persisting. There was a pang at his heart, a passing fear; then he frowned, and out of his fear and remorse a wave of anger lifted itself and broke over him.

He moved away to the fire. His rage and shame and discontentment crammed his tongue with words. He clenched his fists, feeling himself on the verge of an outburst. Out of himself there came instead of speech a sudden restraint which calmed his hot heart, intercepted his words, eased his mind.

"Wal," Kit was saying, standing near him at the fire, "Pilleger called again to-night."

He said nothing. This was a greater problem than that which his secret feelings made for him.

"He was awful," she said. "He asked for ten more."

"I wish he'd ask for the lot, and have done," he said.

"But he wouldn't take any of those. He said the police knew the numbers. He wanted others. I had to give them to him. Ten, he took."

He made no answer. She watched him for a while, sensing what he was thinking, sharing his plight.

Pilleger, he thought, Pilleger and half the riff-raff of the dockside know that I did it. Lizzie, and Jimsey, and Pilleger.

He could not calculate what width and distance the consequences of his theft had, nor what might arise within those bounds. He could only feel that he had set something in motion, permitted his secret to escape him and enter the foolish or unscrupulous hands of others. Pilleger, and Lizzie, and Jimsey. And in them was something engendered by their knowledge of what he had done: ambitions, impulses, desires, spinning and gathering sound and speed. Expanding, making noise, growing into an immeasurable circumstance.

PART TWO

THE MAN

I

THEREAFTER he waited uneasily for it to open upon him, for Lizzie to appear again at his door and stand there grinning at him; for Jimsey Jones to offer him another note, or the Police to call on him and ask questions. A week passed, and during all that time he imagined he was being encircled: the Police making enquiries, and watching him; a mass of evidence being collected regarding all his movements. Pilleger, too, watching and waiting.

It irritated him. His proud spirit resented what he believed was an attempt to spy upon him and take him unawares; and he felt himself humiliated before those unseen eyes which had him at this disadvantage. He was troubled; he prepared himself, was always on the alert, ready to bluff, stand his ground. He had a grand mouthful of lies ready for them! Let them come! Let them plot, he thought, I'm ready. I know how to deal with them. Yet, actually, he was without any sort of preparation except this boastful self-assurance.

He could not foretell in what way the affair would develop. He had not troubled to consider how it would move. He could do nothing but wait for something to happen, wait in suspense, like any fool caught in folly.

Until at last, after another week had passed, he began to believe that the whole affair was over. Its sole clue had rendered nothing, and the Police had no further information to help them. The newspapers had ceased to mention it, as a dog ceases to gnaw an old bone when a new one is given him. The hours, the dawns and dusks that made days, and the occupations, pleasures, sorrows which mankind had to fill those days had washed his crime into forgetfulness. Nobody troubled to recall it.

Whereupon, his dread slipped from him. He recovered himself. The thing was over, done with, and he had been a fool to torture himself with silly fancies about its consequences to him. As if Lizzie, or Jimsey, or Pilleger, could make anything of it!

It was time he breathed again. It was time he realised that he had almost made a hash of his life. He had been given another chance. He must get hold of himself, find his faults. That was the way. Find out where the mistakes had been.

His recovery was rapid. He felt as if he had climbed beyond everything that had formerly vexed him, and reached a height from whence he could look back and at the same time find satisfaction because of his good fortune and his attainment to this security. His moods were wonderful, buoyed as he was by this new spring of happiness. Every feature of his life attracted him, and he wondered how it was that he had been irked by them in the past. What a fool he had been!

In the evenings he went to the Punter Athletic Club; and there, in friendly bouts, he learned the exercise from the young constable.

"When we first tried this, remember? Time you threw me twice, and I got rattled about it? Got rattled because I couldn't get the hang of the thing," he said.

The constable merely smiled. He remembered the occasion quite well, and thought: "Funny how he's changed. Must have some cause for it. There's a reason for it. It's queer."

But Kobling had no suspicion of this. He was transformed. He was under a new emotion, and was running it to waste. He no longer envied other men their successes, no longer coveted the things they had. He felt rich himself; rich in freedom, security, happiness.

It was wearing thin, though, after his riot with it. Still, it might have sufficed to carry him through this difficult period, had it not been for an encounter which occurred late one evening, five weeks after the theft. Then its inadequate protection left him exposed once more to the raw wind of anxiety, to fears of arrest. It was as if he had paraded in garments of a sort which he imagined suited him and afforded him protection. He had trusted his moods, his destiny. Now he knew that since the theft he had never been out of danger. He knew this the moment he encountered Pilleger.

He had not seen him for weeks. After that first call, when he had demanded ten pounds, he had not called again. Kit hoped that that was the end of the matter. Kobling not so much hoped as believed it. He decided that the draper was not the kind of man who would resort to intimidation of that sort. Then when he was leaving the saloon one night he saw Pilleger walking slowly past the door, and it seemed to him that he was strolling to and fro there as if he were waiting

until the coast were clear, or for some access of courage in his miserable heart.

The idea struck Kobling immediately. It cleaved the peace which had grown in his mind during the past weeks, and admitted a new, terrible possibility. It went deeper still, finding in him the old fear of humiliation, the strata of his character which made him vain, proud, and could not bear to see him subjected by conditions imposed by someone of lesser physical power than himself.

He halted, pretending only a vague notice of the draper, as if the latter's presence were too familiar to rouse any special notice or greeting. He drew on his gloves, settled his scarf. But covertly he watched Pilleger; and as the latter came past him Kobling lifted his head, gazing at him for a second, nodded, and set off towards the Club.

In the instant when their eyes had met Kobling felt confirmed in his suspicions, and at once all the happiness which had swung out of him a moment previously, took further flight from him. He became empty and hopeless. All that he had ever dreaded in connection with the folly of his crime was concentrated at last in the figure of Pilleger. The peace he had reached after so much doubt and uncertainty was ended, and a problem of incalculable size was beginning for him. Pilleger had set it.

He halted when he had crossed the road and gone a dozen paces down a side street leading to the Athletic Club. He waited there. This miserable conjecture which had fallen so heavily upon him, destroyed so many things by which he lived. How could he talk, laugh, mix with other men, when all the time he was obsessed with the fear that Kit might be suffering, that Pilleger might be calling on her to demand money which, if refused, would infuriate the draper to all sorts of revenges? And what would his revenge be? And if money were paid to him, how much money, and how long? How many years of that sort of treatment would he mete to them? What did he intend to do? And how could his own life proceed towards success, happiness, under these wretched conditions?

Cautiously, Kobling returned to the corner opposite his saloon. He kept well back in the darkness, for Pilleger was still walking to and fro outside the saloon. Perhaps he was merely taking a little exercise and fresh air after a tiresome day in the shop? But had he forgotten all about the theft? And whenever he passed the saloon door would he not be reminded of it, and would he not see how easy it was to make

some plan whereby he could make the Koblings give him money? What was in his mind as he walked slowly there, his shoulders hunched under his long overcoat, his arms deep in the pockets, his lean neck bent forward as if he were peering into the darkness?

Kobling watched him, unable to decide what to do. Why not go to him now, and ask him: "What are you going to do about it? Why are you prowling here, outside my place?"

But there was no need to ask that question after all, for Pilleger was returning to his shop where one yellow, pale gas light shone in the window. Kobling saw him go in and close the door. He saw the black-coated figure going about the shop, turning out the dim lights one after another until there was only the one in the window left alight. Then that too was extinguished and the place was in darkness. He knew then that the draper had bolted the shop for the night. What he did not know was that Pilleger had noticed his return to the corner.

That had alarmed the draper. He was afraid that Kobling intended to do him some harm and was watching for an opportunity to come at him in the darkness. As he strolled there, he knew that his fear was absurd. It came from a foolish suspicion, and he got rid of it almost immediately. In its place there came another idea which was quite the reverse of its forerunner.

It gave him quite a satisfactory pleasure. It made him glow suddenly and forget his tiredness. It was the most exciting feeling that had ever happened to him in a life marked by only four or five startling moments in all. All his faculties were alert, tingling, and he wanted most frantically to test them in this moment when they were all so much at his command. He felt brave, confident.

He turned round very carefully so as not to appear as if he were spying, and walked back past the saloon. Now without any difficulty he could see Kobling. He was at the opposite corner, swaying back into the shadow there.

Why, thought Pilleger, why is he watching me? He wants to find what I am going to do. Very well, I shall keep him waiting there in doubt.

He felt as if he had some sort of power over Kobling. He wanted to bait him, exasperate him, so that he would come rushing across the road in a fit of fury. Then he would turn slowly and go back to his shop at the moment Kobling reached the pavement. He would leave him standing there,

nonplussed in rage. But that faint sense of power over the barber got hold of him in such a way that he wanted to consider it and make better use of it. It had possibilities. It was something he could turn to advantage.

Again he turned. This time he returned to his shop. He knew that the barber was watching him, so he was careful to go round the shop turning out all the lights. Then, when he was sure that Kobling could no longer see him, he went quickly back to the door and peered through the glass.

There, in full view on the opposite side of the road, was Kobling. He was staring at the shop. He had come out of his hiding-place, and was standing as if unable to make up his mind what to do. He looked tired, puzzled, angry.

Slowly, he crossed the road towards his own place. Slowly at first, then quickly, running, with his coat open. Pilleger remained at the door until he was out of sight.

"Well!" he exclaimed. "That's an extraordinary way for a man like that to behave! I believe . . . I really believe he's afraid of me!"

II

Kobling let himself in and locked the door behind him. He stood absolutely still in the darkness of the saloon, every movement of his body arrested. A fresh and very alarming suspicion had occurred to him.

He suspected that Pilleger was in the habit of coming here during his absence and demanding money from Kit who, from fear and an unwillingness to share his trouble, kept silent about it. He was convinced of this, not by any reasonable deductions, but merely by the force of his suspicions falling into his mind where for a while there had been so much quietude.

"That's it," he told himself. "He was waiting there, taking a turn or two, to screw up his bloody courage or wait until I had gone! Waiting there to sneak in here and badger Kit, because he hasn't the courage to tackle me!" As soon as he had said this, he remembered what Kit had told him of Pilleger's first visit. "That's it!" he murmured again.

His momentary anxiety vanished, and a kind of satisfaction shaped itself from his belief that he had discovered Pilleger's intention. Now he knew what the other was doing. He had caught him in the act. He had discovered his plan, and the issue was joined at last. No more waiting or worrying about all sorts of troublesome eventualities. No more of that.

He knew that he was a match for Pilleger now that the latter had shown himself. In facing a circumstance where he imagined he could recognise all the elements, he was formidable. The real note of his character vibrated in him. He was bold, impulsive, cunning.

He moved slowly through the dark saloon and entered the little living-room behind it. He looked excited. Without a word to Kit he removed his overcoat and scarf and gloves, and hung them behind the door. She watched him, surprised.

"I thought you were going up to the Club! What's the matter?"

He smiled a little. "That's what I thought."

He came and stood near her. She could see that he was excited about something. She recognised his mood. She had seen him like this before a race in which an outsider had been tipped to win, and sometimes after a long argument in which, for once, he had put in his word and taken the whole thing under his control.

"What is it?" she asked.

"I've just seen Pilleger outside."

"What did he say?"

"Nothing. We didn't speak. He was walking up and down waiting for a chance to sneak in here. He thinks I'm away. I went off and let him see me go. Then I came back, but he didn't see me. He's gone back to his place. He'll be here any minute. He thinks I'm out of the way. But wait until he comes knocking here! I hope he comes!"

"What will you say?"

"Say?" He grinned. "Shan't say anything." He held up a clenched fist.

She was worried. "Wal, now please, please don't do anything you'll regret afterwards."

He flashed at her angrily, and broke in on her remark.

"How many times has he been here altogether?"

"Only twice. I told you."

"How many times?" he shouted.

"But, Wal, I told you . . ." She was distressed.

His voice rose to fury. He clenched his fists.

"I'm asking you how many times he's come here and got money from you while I was out! That's what I want to know! How often does he come here?"

She sat down opposite him. "Wal, I've told you. Why won't you believe me? I've told you. He's been twice, that's all."

He could not believe it. It wasn't true. She was lying.

"But he must have been here . . ." he said. His whole mood had collapsed. His fury was dead, his movements no longer swift, but vague and hesitant. She said nothing.

He slumped into his arm-chair beside the fire. Once again he was back in all his uncertainty, trying to find a way, trying to reach Pilleger and challenge him, or accept his challenge.

"He's only been twice," Kit said. "Perhaps that's the end, and he won't come again. He'll let it drop there. He knows the money is no use to us or to him. It's dead money. He won't ask for any more. He won't want our own money."

"He's waiting, that's his game. Think I don't know?" he burst out.

"Waiting for what?"

"Waiting for a chance."

He got up from the chair and walked about the room. Looking at him, she saw how his features expressed all the stress and rebellion of his thoughts against this indignity which he imagined Pilleger had put upon him.

"Waiting for a chance to get us under his thumb! Didn't I see him myself, out there, padding up and down, spying on us? Out there, on the watch, thinking out a way to make us . . ."

"Oh!" she rejoined, angrily. "It's nothing but your silly imagination!"

"I don't care what it is. Imagination or truth. I can't stand it! I can't do anything, with him skulking there, walking round us, taking his time about it. I can't stand it. I won't! I won't have anybody playing us like that!"

"You must be mad! Mad!"

He struck his hands together. "Wasn't he here a few days ago?"

"Yes," she admitted.

"And before that?"

"Yes, but . . ."

"There you are! See."

He was calmer at once. At last she understood him and knew that as long as he was able to determine the extent of their peril and prepare himself against Pilleger, he was calm and self-confident. It was only inactivity, or vulnerability, which chafed him. His pride could not tolerate the thought of a defeat from a quarter which he had not foreseen.

"See?" he went on. "Here twice. Holding out his hand. Wants a share. Thinks he's going to get rich on it. Thinks

he can go on for years, holding out his hand like that, just because I got away with a trick and he knows about it. See his dodge? See what he's going to do? All right! Now I know."

He resumed his place by the fire.

"What are you going to do, Wal?" she asked.

"Fancy him thinking he could go on like that! Thinking he could treat me like that! As if I was some sort of little louse he could get hold of and put under his boot!"

"Don't make an enemy of him," she begged. "Don't do anything to put him against us. Keep on the right side of him. He's dangerous. He knows a lot. Don't do anything."

"... We've never made an enemy yet."

He looked into the fire and was silent for several minutes, while she sat on the arm of his chair with her hand on his shoulder.

"I wish I'd never done it," he murmured out of his long thoughts. "I wish to God it hadn't happened."

"Why did you do it, Wal? What was it? What made you? That's what I want to know. You're not a thief. It wasn't the sort of thing you'd do."

"It was an open chance. I knew the place. When I was a kid, I used to play round there. I was going past and I saw the window wide open. Not a soul in the street. It was dark. I knew I'd have it all my own way. I was sure of it. It was funny how I felt it would be safe for me and nothing would stop me. I knew it would be clear. I took a jump up and got in. I felt fine. Wasn't a bit nervous. Just climbed in and walked through the store and into the office. Up the stairs. One of those modern offices. When I was a kid it used to be full of old stools and long old desks and spikes hanging with invoices on them from the ceiling. Now it's all modern. They've got some of those modern safes. I had a wrench in my hand. I'd got it in the store. I started in on the safe, but it was funny . . . it was luck . . . the thing wasn't locked. I could have opened it with my fingers. Luck. I just took the notes. Nothing happened. I slipped out quickly downstairs and out by the window. I heard the watchman coming round. Soon as I was in the street, though, soon as I was out, I felt it was silly and all that. I didn't want the money then. I thought I'd chuck it back through the window. Then I thought somebody might come along and get off with it. One of the hands. So I kept it. I felt different then, when I kept it. Now, though . . ."

"Wal, but whatever for? Why?"

He did not answer. She went on: "Promise me. Promise me you won't do anything like that again? Anything . . . on the spur of the moment."

"All right."

"Promise."

"I promise."

"You'll have to watch yourself. You've promised me, don't forget. Nothing-like that again."

He nodded.

"So don't think anything more about what you did, or what's going to happen, or Pilleger and what you think he's going to do."

He stretched out his legs and leaned back in his chair. He was preoccupied. She knew that she had not altogether captured his attention. His promise had been given only from the surface of his conscience. Beneath that, there was a region which she could never penetrate either with entreaties or demands, and which he himself hardly understood or had never properly explored.

III

On the following evening Pilleger sat in his private room making up his accounts. He had hardly any other form of diversion for his leisure. He did not employ a book-keeper, but kept his books himself. It was partly a responsibility, partly his method of enjoying himself.

He was a very precise person. Everything about his life was arranged, down to the minutest detail. He had condemned himself to that sort of life. He had a time for everything, so much for this, so much for that, during the sixteen hours between seven in the morning, when he rose, and a quarter to eleven at night, when he went to bed. And for twenty-four years, ever since he had inherited this business from his parents, he had lived in the same unchanging routine. Almost relentlessly.

When he had been a youth with a fortune of two thousand pounds, ten thousand pounds had seemed a wonderful sum to him. Yet now, when he possessed between fifty and sixty thousand pounds, his fortune did not give him the same pleasure which the contemplation of his two thousand pounds had done years before. He was accustomed to its total. But when he thought of a sum like two hundred thousand pounds, his breath nearly left his body. His miserly soul shook excitedly at the thought of such a fortune, and at the notion that given

time and opportunity, he himself might one day reach a fortune like that.

He feared everything which might delay his journey towards a goal like that. Vanities, unprofitable pleasures, attributes of character which only hindered a man from his purpose, he had got rid of them all. He never loitered. Never went for holidays. Had never loved women, or been loved by any. He had no friends, had never felt the need of them, nor felt oppressed by his solitary existence. His only assistant—a pleasant-mannered, ageing spinster—was devoted to him because he paid her good wages, and because she believed she was admitted to the principle which guided his life. She tidied his flat, cooked his breakfast and dinner, and sat down every day to share the midday meal with him, keeping an eye on the shop door all the time.

"Yesterday's sales were up."

"That was because of the fair."

"That traveller from . . ."

"From Gozney's. Mr. Livett."

"Better order from him when he calls back."

"All right. I'll look up and see how we are for socks."

"Might look up and see what we're like for wool."

"What we're like for three-ply. All right."

"Shan't get any more of those linen towels."

"No more of those linens?"

"No sale for them."

"I thought so, too."

It was all they ever talked about. Ever had, ever would.

The room in which he worked reflected his character. Everything in it was so pronouncedly his, bore the neat, severe stamp which his habits had, that when he was out and his assistant entered the place, she felt something of his presence around her even then. It was strange. She stood still and pondered it. He was a miser, strict; he had conquered every distraction and set them all outside himself. What was left still attracted her. It was neat, singular. It had humour in itself. It was a little world, a little creation he had made of himself. She would have liked to share it very closely with him.

On this particular evening he finished his work earlier than he had expected. He closed his ledgers and cleared away the invoices. From the corner, he drew out a little table on which a portable gramophone stood. All his movements were quick, accurate. There was never any pause in his progress from one occupation to another. There was never any doubt in his

mind as to what he would do next. Everything was regulated, he knew himself and what he wanted.

He put a record on the gramophone, wound the instrument and sat down to listen. It was a record of one of Bach's works. He had dozens of them. He liked to listen to them at times like this. They removed something stale and wearisome from him, and stimulated his energies. They delighted him, too, because their music was precise, strict in form, with nothing loose or extravagant or extraordinary in it. No expanding bursts of music that flooded the ear and charged in upon one's reflections to upset them with unwelcome emotions. Nothing but a careful pattern which he could recognise as something achieved within circumscribed bounds.

He knew nothing of music, and had never felt any inclination for other works. Bach was what he liked. He didn't know who he was. Wasn't curious about him. But liked his music. He had been passing a shop one day, and the sound of a gramophone playing one of these records had reached him. He had gone into the shop and listened, asked questions. Whereupon the assistant had played some more Bach, and Pilleger had listened carefully.

"That's what I call music," he said.

It harmonised with the essential note in his character. It delighted him. He bought a portable gramophone and half a dozen records. All of Bach's works. Since then he had bought many more, all by the same composer. It was the only music he was able to appreciate, and it had become almost a necessity to him. The music had an effect on him. It gave him a feeling of security. It made him feel that the way he was living was proper. He had often wanted to be assured about that, and now he was convinced at last. He had often wondered if other people thought as he did, lived as he did, in the same terms, by the same ideals. He believed that this music he listened to expressed not only one life, one ideal, but a whole world like the little personal one he had made for himself. It was joyous in its compass, it was economical, restrained, beautiful. It was just like the life he led.

All at once, his attention was broken. Someone was ringing the bell on the shop door. He frowned, but did not trouble to stop the record or get up. His attention assembled itself once more, but was broken again a moment later by a louder peal which was followed in turn by the sound of heavy blows on the door.

He rose and stopped the record. He was annoyed. He

stood quite still, trying to decide whether he would answer the bell or not. It sounded again, echoing though the silent premises in a way which was unfamiliar to him and seemed to herald the advent of dreadful events. It made him momentarily afraid. Nevertheless, he was curious to know who was there, and in the end his fears gave way to his inquisitiveness.

He turned down the light in the room and cautiously opened the door. On tiptoe he went down the shop towards the entrance. Now, as the hammering began again, shaking the door and window-frames, he became very angry. Fear and curiosity no longer moved him. He began to shout as he hurried forward.

"Stop thumping that door! I'm coming! Leave that door alone!"

He reached it, and with a few deft movements unfastened its bolts and flung it wide open.

"What do you mean by all this racket!"

He stood glaring out into the darkness, filling the doorway with his indignant figure. Then he recognised the person standing there. It was the Inspector who had called some weeks previously.

"Oh!" Pilleger began, steadying himself. "You make a lot of noise!" He went on pretending that he did not know who it was. "What do you want?"

"I'm sorry to knock you up and disturb you, Mr. Pilleger. You remember me?"

"Yes, I do, now you remind me," Pilleger said grudgingly.

"I've got something very important to discuss with you."

"Well, it's getting late," Pilleger said. "But I suppose there's nothing else to do but ask you to come inside."

The Inspector smiled at this rebuff. "Thanks very much."

Pilleger stepped aside and admitted him. He could not resist another little thrust. "Let me see, isn't it about the outrage the Communists committed at Glennett's?"

"That's right," the Inspector returned. "The theft at the Mill."

"Good heavens! Haven't you got the man yet?" Pilleger exclaimed as he led the Inspector through the shop. "I quite thought . . ."

"You promised to help us."

"I did?"

He turned up the light and motioned his visitor to a chair.

"I'm here on duty," the Inspector said, "so if you don't mind we'll get on with things and stop the nonsense. We quite understand each other. In case you've forgotten, I'll re-

mind you that you received a certain number of one-pound notes during the course of business, and it transpired that they were a part of the property stolen from Glennett's Mill. . . ."

"Yes . . . let me think . . . yes . . ."

"I came to see you, and you could not help us at all then. We left it that if we wanted assistance later on from you, we would call."

"Yes, now I remember." Pilleger smiled. There was a pause. "Well?" he asked. "Go on."

"Mr. Pilleger, we're determined to get to the bottom of this affair. We've got a good deal of information, and we only need a very little more to get this case concluded as we want it. We want your help, because we know that you're the only person who can tell us what we want to know."

"I must say, Inspector, I really can't tell you any more than I did when you called before," Pilleger said.

"We believe you know who committed the theft." The Inspector said that rather quietly. It gave his statement an effect of force.

"Oh, goodness me! What nonsense!" Pilleger said.

"After all, you must have met him. He must have come to you with his seventy-four pounds."

"Inspector, what are you saying?"

"Just that. You know who he is, and we want the information from you."

Pilleger got up and poked the fire. The coal spluttered, and some sparks flew into the grate as the knob took flame.

"It astonishes me to hear you make these surmises," he said. Then he turned and looked at his visitor to see if the remark had had much effect.

"If I were you, Mr. Pilleger, I would think of the consequences to yourself if you refuse to tell us."

"Your wild surmises!"

"The truth."

"It's preposterous," Pilleger retorted quietly. He added angrily: "I explained everything . . . everything . . . to you when you were here before."

"Not quite everything."

"I answered all your questions."

"I know. Except one which I didn't ask you. I wanted to give you a chance to explain. . . ."

"Very well. Ask me now. . . ."

"I'd rather you told me yourself, without my having to cross-examine you."

"There's nothing more I can tell you!" Pilleger declared.
"You know as much as I do."

The Inspector was silent for a while. Then he asked in a matter-of-fact way: "Tell me, how was it that the notes which you said you received from various customers happened to be consecutive numbers? Remember, seventy-four notes all from different people, and yet all numbered consecutively."

"Were they?" Pilleger said. He tried to appear unmoved by this fact. His voice was quiet in tone after his angry outburst of a moment before. He did not know what to say.

The Inspector showed him a list on official paper. He gave a glance at it. "What a coincidence!" he murmured. He was very frightened.

"Too good to be true," the other said.

"There it is," Pilleger said foolishly. "Strange things do happen."

The Inspector smiled, shook his head. He was waiting for an explanation. "Is that all you can tell me, Pilleger?"

The draper looked at the fire and was silent for a while.

"This business," he said presently, "this business looks as though it's going to be very important. I never quite realised it until now. After all, there wasn't much about it in the papers, and in a city of this size things happen every day, especially in this Ward. And, of course, some time has elapsed since the robbery, and I never imagined you were still working on the case. Still, I understand now, and I'll certainly give you all the assistance I can. That's a promise. I'm going to help you find the thief, since you've come to me for assistance. I shall need . . . two days. If you could wait until then."

"Meanwhile, couldn't you tell me how it was that seventy-four notes from as many people happened to be numbered consecutively?"

"It's a mystery to me," Pilleger said readily.

"I suggest that it was never a mystery to you."

Pilleger pouted. "You're treating me as if I were the criminal in the case! You're almost accusing me of having had something to do with it!"

"We believe you received these notes, knowing they were stolen property."

"Preposterous! Why don't you take action against me, then?"

"Because we prefer to offer you a chance to explain."

"Well, I have explained. I've told you . . ."

"You've told us nothing. You've been careful to hide the

truth. Somebody brought those notes to you to pay an account. One person. Your memory can't be so bad that it fails to recall who that person was. We're not suggesting that you stole the money from the Mill, but we do suggest that you knew it was stolen. . . ."

"But I've said . . ."

"We've been very lenient with you, Pilleger. All we want from you is the name of the person who handed the notes to you, that's all. You've said you want two days. Very well, we'll give you two days to make up your mind."

"It's a threat, isn't it?"

The Inspector stood up. "Take my advice, Pilleger. Give us the information we want."

The draper smiled faintly as he held open the door. He followed the Inspector down the shop and saw him off the premises.

"Don't forget. Two days."

"I'll do my best," Pilleger said.

He locked the door again and returned slowly to his room. He felt restless and unhappy. All his composure had gone, and his thoughts were in a turmoil. He had had a terrible fright and was shaken. It was quite true, he had taken money which he had known was stolen, but at the time his knowledge had not been at all certain. He had only suspected the truth. He knew now that he had acted foolishly in accepting cash instead of a cheque from Mrs. Kobling.

But this fact hardly troubled him now that the Inspector was gone and he had time in which to think of an excuse for himself. He knew that nothing could be proved against him, except that he had received the money. He was too respected in the city for any serious suspicion to be attached to him. The Police were only trying to frighten him. They had done it very successfully so far, but from now on he was a match for them. They could send as many Inspectors as they liked. He could handle them all, one after the other, without any difficulty, for they had stated their case against him fully, and he knew how to proceed.

What occupied him at this time, was the way the Koblings had behaved. They had put him in grave danger. He felt that they had not only made a fool of him, but had taken revenge on him for his harsh debt. Now he, too, wanted satisfaction. But apart from that, there was some sort of opportunity opening to him. He wanted to consider it, determine it. Already, he had exacted a certain consideration from

the Koblings, but he had never admitted to himself that from that small beginning he could continue to intimidate them. He had relinquished his efforts in that direction, probably because in himself there was not sufficient approval or enthusiasm for that sort of rascality. Perhaps he was afraid of provoking the barber. Perhaps his sneaking demands for money from Mrs. Kobling lacked purpose. Now, however, he wanted satisfaction, revenge. He felt angry against them.

He stood near the fire, trying to decide what to do. This circumstance was momentous for him, yet it was difficult for him to decide what to do. His life was so finely regulated in every particular that the admittance of this new and intricate factor might bring only confusion in all his affairs. He must be cautious. It would never do to let himself be attracted to a certain course, only to discover when he had made plans and set his heart on it that it was too dangerous, too difficult or beyond the force of his character to conduct to a proper conclusion. Such a result would wreck his self-esteem and bring to ruin every delicate structure in his life. Disorder would enter his affairs. He meditated for a long time.

He could not quite trust himself. He had never approached such a difficult matter before. He had to consider not only Kobling's reactions to the affair, but his own as well. He had to search himself and find what were his resources, whether he could embark on a certain course and continue resolutely in it against all the defences and attacks which Kobling might make.

He could not quite renounce what he had in mind, in spite of all the dangers it might bring upon him. It was so attractive. It was such a simple way of obtaining money. He had tentatively tried it already. Twice. And on both occasions, whatever he had asked for had been given him readily, without protest. So why could he not continue like that, giving his behaviour a name, calling it protection, telling Kobling that he would give him protection at a certain price? Then he would say to the Inspector: "I know nothing." And for this falsehood and the risk it would entail, he would ask a price from the barber.

It seemed a fair proposition to him, and he thought that Kobling could not complain at it. The difficult point to decide was the effect of the arrangement on the barber.

He was an extraordinary character, almost incalculable to Pillegger who, despite his knowledge and insight regarding people, had never been able to assess him accurately. To try to

intimidate him would require not only knowledge of his obtuse temperament, but the wielding of qualities far more compelling, far more vigorous than his own. Also, it would be necessary for Pillegger to rid himself of his fear of Kobling first of all.

He was afraid of him, always had been, because of the impression of turbulent power which Kobling presented. So much of it, expressed in his movements, his glances, his attitudes! A vision of violence, chaos. And because Kobling frightened him, he was annoyed, and could never encounter the barber without feeling small, timid, mean, and indignant with himself and the other.

Now, pondering this, it occurred to him that here was an opportunity to bring some sort of order into this contact, to effect some sort of discipline upon that character. Yet, at the mere thought of any closer contact with the barber, a great gust of repugnance swept through him, and he felt that to attempt this condition upon Kobling would be like trying to order the very elements. He shuddered and shook his head. Why, even when the barber had seemed so afraid of him last night, he had felt disturbed himself, troubled by the fact that Kobling might believe there was something to be prepared against.

He walked about his room. He tried to dismiss all thought of his tentative plan from his mind. He made emphatic gestures with his hands and shook his head. He had his life and all his affairs arranged, and there was no room, no time. . . .

Then he stood quite still, feeling a remote, unexpected desire unfold itself and speak to him, insisting, putting little images before him in a panorama. It fascinated him to contemplate his thoughts. It was impossible for him to deny himself the pleasure which they evoked in him; and he saw himself in all manner of wonderful circumstances, rich and powerful as he had always wanted to be.

But all at once he made another abrupt gesture and swept the whole vision from his mind. Immediately, he felt disappointed. His miser's soul could not forgo this chance of increasing his wealth, nor his niggardly, precise mentality the wonderful opportunity to exert its craft and power over the confusion of Kobling's character. Also (and this was perhaps the greatest factor in his decision) he was already pledged to the project. He had made the first steps last week. The others could be taken gradually and carefully. What he had attempted once, he could surely attempt again, many times, with just as much success.

That was the decision he made, but he had no intention of acting upon it until Kobling or his wife visited him. He knew that Kobling could not tolerate an uncertain position. Already he had that impression of him: that he chafed under uncertainty. Very well. He would continue to keep him guessing, then when he came to ask what intention he had, he would tell him.

Still, now that he had taken himself thus far, he had a moment of almost sickening apprehension. He saw what risks attached to his plan. They were enormous. Looking at them from this inner viewpoint he saw others that were attendant upon them; yet something which he had never suspected in himself remained obdurate and would not permit his better judgment to guide him. He felt that already he had calculable advantages in his hands which he might exert over the barber. He did not care to throw away those chances or release his man.

Now, still somewhat apprehensive, he began to tidy his room and prepare for bed. It was long past his usual hour of retirement, and as he glanced at the clock he had a curious sensation of having broken a cherished habit and committed himself to an incredible folly.

IV

On the day following the Inspector's visit to Pilleger, the young constable who was studying for promotion into the detective force was relieved from night duty at the station, and posted on special patrol along Kepnor Road.

This change in his duties was made partly on his own request, and also on the instructions of the Inspector in charge of the Glennett Mill case. From the moment when the theft had been reported, the young constable had shown considerable interest in the affair, and had filed much loose information and presented it in a form which had pleased his superior officers who were working on the case. Besides this, he had prepared his own report of certain features of the affair, asserting several points which besides amusing his chief had also decided him to follow the suggestions contained in them.

His major point was that several persons had committed the robbery, and had afterwards made use of Pilleger by passing some of the notes to him. The names of these individuals were known to the draper, and although it appeared as if all the likely avenues of clues had been carefully closed against detection, it was still possible to follow the course of the

aftermath of the crime amongst the thieves. There would be comings and goings, quarrels, all revolving about the principal figure, Kobling.

The young constable had brought his suppositions to a point by stating that although Kobling was the ringleader, Pilleger, too, had an important part in the crime. He believed there might be trouble between these two, later on; and he suggested that it was important that the two should disagree, should visit each other, and perhaps betray each other at last. To some degree, the other figures concerned in the robbery should be watched too. Mrs. Kobling, and the notorious Lizzie Crane.

At present, these broad suggestions and suppositions rested rather thinly on gossip which had been reported by plain-clothes men. There was little else to support them. Still, it was agreed that two or three apparently insignificant facts might bear out the ideas and show them to be truth. Therefore, in order to give the case progress along these lines, special men were posted to keep watch opposite those two shops in Kepnor Road.

The young constable's post was opposite the draper's shop. He worked with plain-clothes men, and during the whole of that first day the three of them hardly took their eyes from that low premise. Nothing unusual occurred. Only the ordinary custom passed in and out of the place, and finally, late in the evening, Pilleger came to the threshold and stood there for some time before retiring and closing the door. Then, one after another, the lights in the shop were darkened. A blank day.

The young constable shifted his weight from one foot to the other. He was tired. He had been on duty all day, with only one hurried break for a meal at midday. It was past nine o'clock. He was disappointed. He wondered how many days would pass in this way before some of the suspects made contact with one another, and he would be there to note it and prove his case.

He yawned. His gaze strayed a little from the draper's shop, and went to right and left along the little terrace on which Pilleger's place stood.

And there, dressed in an overcoat, his hat set rakishly, was Kobling at his own door.

The young constable kept his shelter behind one of the permanent stalls in the Road and watched the barber carefully. Kobling was going in the direction of Pilleger's shop. That was exciting. But was he going to call there?

He went slowly along the terrace of shops. He halted at the door, rang the bell and waited. The door was opened and he entered abruptly. The door closed after him. It had happened!

The young constable forgot his tiredness. He was suddenly refreshed. The two plain-clothes men passed him and winked at him, and he grinned in response. They took up stations at shops farther along the Road, standing idly like loafers staring at the goods in the windows.

Almost an hour passed before the door of Pilleger's shop opened again and Kobling came out. He hurried back to his own place. He seemed angry. What had happened?

V

It was dark and very quiet inside Pilleger's shop, and after his first exclamation of surprise, the draper lowered his voice as if his faculty of speech were muffled by the heavy, inactive air of the shop which at all times deadened the healthy echo of the world outside.

"Good evening, Mr. Kobling. Do you want to see me?"

That was all he could think of to say to conceal his nervousness. He had been awaiting this visit, had hoped the other would come, yet now that Kobling was here, the visit had something of the unexpected about it, and he was unprepared for it in a way which he could not understand.

He shut the door behind the barber and led the way down the shop towards the room at the rear, whose light was the only guidance through the gloom of the place. As he walked, his body was silhouetted against the light, and to the barber his shape was hunched, with something suggestive of evil about it. Momentarily, Kobling regretted having come to visit him in this murky place which in itself was sufficient indication of the inhuman qualities of his soul that seemed to require darkness, silence, solitude, instead of all the friendly light and contact of mankind.

"Can you see? Can you make your way?" Pilleger was saying. "Mind this counter here."

Kobling said nothing, but followed the other into the room.

"Sit down," Pilleger said, pointing to a chair. He moved his own chair from the desk and sat down, folding one leg over the other. He did not look at his visitor. His eyes seemed to swivel their glance everywhere but at the level, unvarying gaze of the other.

"I was expecting you," he went on. "I was rather hoping you would come and see me." As he spoke, his head turned slowly, and his eyes that had glanced at the fire, then the carpet, and finally Kobling's shoes, suddenly lifted their gaze and lighted on the barber's sullen face.

It reminded the latter of the moment in a fight when the opponent comes warily into the centre of the ring from his corner. He had come here to challenge Pilleger and fight him on a certain matter. Except when he had given a curt greeting to him when the door was opened, he had not yet spoken, but had tried to make the nature of his visit obvious by keeping this grim silence. He had watched the draper for this instant when their eyes would meet. He had waited, determined to strike the first blow by taking the initiative. Now, when Pilleger looked at him for the first time, he felt it like a blow from someone prepared, skilful, determined. He was taken by surprise. He had imagined that he had this interview in his hands, and that Pilleger's hushed preliminary remarks were a true indication of his uneasy feelings. Now he realised that from the moment he had entered, Pilleger had taken the action from him and started an offensive against him. And listening to him now as his words took force and weight, he felt his own personality to be vague and ineffectual and already retreating in defeat.

He had come here in the full flight of angry fettle, full of resolve and fight. But he was no match for his adroit opponent. He stared at Pilleger and saw the flame of a remorseless temperament, clear and scorching. He felt helpless, the utter futility of attempting a victory over the draper occurring to him and making him start at his own folly.

"We have something we must settle without delay," Pilleger was saying. "You know what I'm speaking about . . ."

He kept his eyes on the barber. He was silent for some seconds. Actually, his heart was loaded with fear. He felt sick. The effort he had had to make ever since this glowering figure had stepped over his threshold tired him and created an awful terror in him. He was afraid he would suddenly lose his nerve. He was almost in panic already, for one part of him beckoned him to have nothing more to do with his dangerous purpose, while another part urged him farther into the situation against all his own trembling feelings. He hesitated, did not know which way to turn, could not find anything to say. Even when he ventured a remark, it chilled his blood to hear the sound of his own words. He could not dis-

cover what effect they had on Kobling who sat, erect and inscrutable, opposite him. It was terrifying. He compared his own abject spirit to the immeasurable calm of the other.

Yet, somehow, words came to his tongue, although he could hardly breathe. He contrived to utter them, pausing, as if he were giving them weight.

"I'm speaking about the money your wife gave me to square her debt to me. Seventy-four pounds . . ."

Kobling watched him, full of dismay, thinking: "Look at him! Shaking with anger. He knew I would come here. He knew I couldn't stand it, couldn't stand not knowing what he had in mind."

"All right," he burst out. "Go on. Go on. I know. What do you want?"

They were the first words he had spoken. They sounded aggressive, impatient, to Pilleger. He struggled for breath.

"Well, go on!" Kobling said. "What is it? I'm listening."

The draper's lips were dry. His tongue seemed thick and unwieldy in his mouth, and a great gap had come along the delicate thread of his faculty of speech. Words piled themselves on his tongue, like frightened things crowded on the brink between thought and utterance; but there they huddled, and he could not speak them. His heart raced. He was cold. He suffered all these qualms and miserable discomforts, whilst opposite him, like a stone column, composed, defended, the barber sat. Looking at him, Pilleger felt envious of his calm; and a little wisp of anger moved in his heart at the thought of his own abasement here, in his own room, before this visitor.

The anger saved him. It took fire, and grew in him until its heat warmed and filled his chilly heart. He took it as his refuge. It guided him.

He stood up and turned his back to Kobling, kicking the fire in the grate with the heel of his boot. The coal broke, ignited, and a flame curled from it. He spun round.

"Seventy-four pounds, and every one of them from the batch you stole from Glennett's Mill. . . ."

"Were they?" Kobling murmured.

"Were they? You ask me if they were? You knew . . . why, you knew all along! You both knew! You tried to make a fool of me! You can't deny it. I've been in business a good many years without anything like that happening to me before. I've never touched stolen property or money before. I've never been in trouble with the Police until now!"

At the mention of the Police, Kobling moved slightly, but did not speak. Pilleger continued.

"There was an Inspector here some weeks ago. He called again last night. They've given me two days. They want to know who gave me those seventy-four pound notes."

Kobling grunted. Pilleger went on: "That was your doing! Your wife gave me the notes. Now the Police are pestering me."

The barber said nothing. He was wondering what Pilleger intended to do. He seemed very angry, and there was no doubt that he had some cause to be. "Let him shout and get wild," Kobling thought. "I don't care." But he cared a great deal, for all the draper's anger seemed to have direction and be leading towards something else which he had in mind.

"I'm not like you," Pilleger continued. "You and I are two different types. I'm not a thief. I'm careful of my reputation. . . ."

"You said just now we had something to settle," Kobling interrupted. "All right. Get on and settle it. Let's settle it."

"I'm careful of my reputation," Pilleger shouted. "You've got me into serious trouble with the Police. Now you can take the consequences. You're the one who's to settle it, not me. I didn't steal the notes. You're the one. And you're going to take the blame. You're not going to get your own way in this affair. You can pay up. You're not going to rob, and then pay me with your bad money. I've been put to a lot of trouble because of your thieving. Now you can settle. . . ."

"All right. Stop shouting and tell me!"

"You can take your choice," Pilleger said.

"What's the choice?"

"Either I go to the Police and tell them who gave me the money, or you pay me to keep silent."

"That's a sort of blackmail," Kobling said.

"Is it? I don't care what it is. If you don't like it, you can refuse it. I'm not forcing you to it. I don't care what you do. If you accept it, I'll keep quiet about your theft. If you don't accept it, I'll have to tell the Police that your wife gave me the money. There you are."

He snapped his lips together. He sat down, crossed his legs, folded his hands. He looked more angry than ever. His face twitched, and his head shook.

"How much? . . ." Kobling muttered, after a pause.

"Five pounds every week."

"For how long?"

"A long time. A long time."

Kobling frowned, and for the first time since the interview had started he lowered his gaze from Pilleger. At last he knew what Pilleger intended to do, what he wanted from him. Five pounds every week. This week, next week, and so on, year after year. And there was no escape from it. The demand dismayed him. He saw it as a hole in his affairs through which his income, his savings, all his meagre profits would pour. Either that, or arrest and conviction for his theft. His anguish and misery showed momentarily on his features. Next moment he recovered himself and looked at Pilleger.

He wanted to protest, and now that the draper had said all he had to say, Kobling waited for his anger to end so that he could attempt some sort of reply. The angry flush had gone from Pilleger's face, but something else was gathering there. Kobling had never suspected that the draper had such a quality as was shown in the incisive, suave, steady glow which filled his face. He sensed the force and ease behind it, and at once his attempt to protest failed in him. He became glum.

All fear had left the draper when he had seen the effect of his words on Kobling. He knew that he had taken his resolve to a successful conclusion. It seemed miraculous, and he could do nothing but stare in triumph at the dejected barber. The thing was accomplished! He had taken the risk and come out safely. He had landed his opponent, brought him into his own orbit, put him into his affairs, into one of the niches in his mind. It was wonderful, strange, and gave him a sensation which he had never before experienced. It was as if he had subjected incredible forces and brought them under his hands to use them towards further successes. It was amazing. He had no experience of this sort of duel, yet he had acted a part, fought cunningly, and emerged victoriously against this incalculable opponent. He wanted to shout with pride. He could see on the barber's face the whole vision of defeat: in the eyes, all the reflection of long thoughts dwelling on the huge price he would have to pay for protection; in the droop and fixity of the muscles, his loss of hope and strength before the pressure of his mournful predicament.

"Five pounds . . . every week . . ." Pilleger exclaimed. "That's the amount. Start to-morrow. . . ."

The other made a movement with his hand to command silence, then he got up. But he did not speak. Without another word, he clapped on his hat and left the room, stalking quickly through the shop, with the draper hastening close behind him and saying:

"Now don't forget, Kobling! We've agreed. You mustn't forget. I shall expect it. I must have it. Five pounds. . . ."

He came panting to the door where the barber was clutching at the handle, trying to let himself out. Stooping down, Pilleger unfastened the bolts and opened the door wide. Kobling hurried out.

Pilleger shut the door quickly behind him and shot the bolt into place. He was breathless.

"There," he said aloud. "That's done! I never thought I could manage an affair like that. I never imagined I had the nerve. There, though. . . . I did it. It didn't take such a lot of nerve after all!"

VI

Kobling said nothing to Kit about his visit to Pilleger.

After the initial shock at the demand the draper had made, he recovered himself. He snorted. Let Pilleger imagine he was going to get five pounds a week! Let him think that was the end of it! But it was not the end, for now that he knew exactly what Pilleger had in mind, he could begin to make his own plans. Only one round had been fought. Perhaps the draper had won an advantage during that round, but the fight was not finished yet.

Unfortunately, although he puzzled himself for hours afterwards, he could not find a way to turn the defeat he had suffered into possible victory. He had imagined that it would be easy to find means of circumventing the alarming plans which Pilleger had made, and he had trusted all the buoyancy and lift and vigour of his character to suggest an escape for him. But all the time, he could not shake off his amazement at the way the draper had taken the offensive and defeated him. He had never imagined there was so much in the character of the other, so much strength of purpose, so much anger, so much that impressed him. The thought held him all day, shattering all his attempts to make a proper retort to Pilleger.

He began to see nothing but the downfall of all his affairs. The vision was persistent, monstrous, irksome, and gradually his pride began to answer it. He would not suffer it. He would not let Pilleger treat him like that. Was he going to permit that? Was he going to pay the money, meekly, each week, to one who was physically inferior to him? Was he going to let himself be bled by Pilleger?

His own rage coiled up from his body at once, trickling into his blood and muscles and answering every doubt, sweeping

aside the conclusions he had reached, telling him that there was a way to answer Pilleger. He checked himself. He wanted to prove to himself that he could meet Pilleger and defeat him without having recourse to violent methods. He wanted to match himself against him and use the same weapons which he had flourished. His superior physical qualities must be left out of the conflict, and if he were to prove to himself that he was the better man, he must accept Pilleger's weapons and force a new issue with them.

He determined to go to him and discuss the matter again. He would tell him that he would not pay the money, and he would let him see that any threat of betrayal would be met by something as mean and as disastrous.

The night was clear but boisterous under a wind which, freshening to a gale, blew in gusts from the south and carried the sounds from the river far across the city. Along Kepnor Road, the wind beat against the street-stalls, shaking the canvas shades, swaying the lamps, throwing the boards against the supports. Windows of shops and houses rattled. Doors shook. The gusts became louder and more prolonged. The pole outside Kobling's saloon shook in its socket, and the sign hanging above the door creaked noisily as the wind swung it.

Kit and Lettie left home shortly after seven o'clock.

"You look out for yourselves in this wind," Kobling warned them as they went through the saloon.

"We'll be back in an hour. We're only going along the Road to do some shopping," Kit said.

But at eight o'clock they had not returned. The wind had settled to a gale. Kobling finished shaving the last customer, and took off his white overall. He dismissed the boy for the night and lowered the blind over the door. When he had counted the day's takings, he turned out the lights in the saloon and went through to the little room at the rear, stretching himself on the settee there and dozing for ten minutes.

His sleep was interrupted by the noise of a fire engine going past at great speed with its bell clanging loudly as the wind tore at it and tossed its echoes high above all other sounds. He yawned, wondering where the fire was. Another engine roared past, and was followed a minute later by a third. A strange anxiety and excitement blew across his mind. He sat up. He could hear the thud of thousands of hurrying feet on the pavement outside the saloon. He rose and hurried to the street door.

Another engine was racing past, the crowds falling apart to

give it way. A fourth! Somewhere a big fire was raging. Already the sky was tinged with a red glow. He fancied he saw that glow upon the figures rushing past his saloon. It was shining on the walls of the opposite buildings, and was reflected on the press of upturned faces going past the door.

He turned back into the room. Four engines. It must be a serious outbreak. With this wind blowing, it would be difficult to put out. He wondered about it all the time he was dressing to visit Pilleger. The sound of fire-engine bells sounded almost continuously from a spot deep in the heart of the docks. The thud of feet had ceased. Outside, in the street, that dark wave passed, leaving the scene deserted, with the wind battering and roaring its way past the empty stalls. He felt uneasy. What was happening? Where were Kit and Lettie? He went on with his dressing.

When he left the shop, shortly after half-past eight, the red glare which he had seen some minutes before appeared more crimson and baleful. It was spread over the entire city. It was reflected in thousands of surfaces. Roofs and windows, cobbles, pavements, the objects in shop-windows, all caught it and held it, as if the source of fire were here, smouldering all about him. Above, even the stars appeared floating in its light, as if the whole universe were ablaze. The wind gave a sense of motion to him, and looking about him at the deserted Road, he felt that the sounds and events of this night were moving under the wind.

He halted. The extraordinary scene delayed him. Its sounds and colours influenced him, gave some inexplicable urgency to his problem, stirred him to a new activity. The winking glare all round him gave heat to his senses, penetrated them, and put a quicker tempo in them. He went on quickly towards Pilleger's shop.

His hand pressed the bell switch and held it down for a full minute. When he saw the light at the far end of the shop, he stopped ringing. He thumped the door. Then he saw the draper's dark form outlined against the light from the room at the rear. A gust of wind struck Pilleger and almost tore the door from his grasp as he stood aside to admit Kobling.

"There's a terrible fire somewhere. And this wind!" he gasped. He had to bend his whole weight against the door to close it. "A big fire. Immense flames. I saw them from my room. I saw them shoot up just now. From somewhere near the docks."

He followed Kobling into the room. He was breathless.

He was wondering if Kobling had come to pay the money, and he kept thinking to himself: "What will he do? Has he brought the money?"

He was startled by Kobling's manner. It was not as it had been yesterday. It was bold, menacing. He tried not to heed it.

"Well," he breathed, panting slightly. "You've brought the money? You've got it with you?"

Kobling stared at him and shook his head. "I'm not going to pay it."

"But we agreed . . ."

"I've changed my mind," Kobling said emphatically. He put down his hat and came nearer Pilleger.

The draper sat down at once. He did not know what to say. He was nonplussed. He had not foreseen such a twist in the situation which to him had seemed decided in the way he and Kobling had left it yesterday. He was afraid to remind Kobling of the alternative now that the money was not going to be paid. He was afraid to speak, for he began to imagine that Kobling was not only determined to dispute the issue but was also about to take the whole matter to another plane. The plane of violence. He trembled.

At that moment the shop-door bell rang. In the ordinary course he would not have troubled to answer it. Now, however, it offered a respite to him in his predicament. Also, he had a sudden hope that the Inspector was outside. He rose and went towards the door.

"Excuse me . . . a moment. . . ."

He hurried down the shop and opened the door. Lizzie Crane was there, bowing and grinning at him.

"Mr. Pilleger, sir, just . . ."

He swore at her. He was angry, disappointed, more afraid than ever. "Go away! Clear off. I'm busy. I'm engaged with Mr. Kobling. Off you go!"

"Oh, Mr. Pilleger," she whined, and licking her thumb she took one greasy card and offered it to him from a little packet which she held in her left hand.

She had found employment. A wandering artist from the summer resorts had come to the district and set up as a caricaturist. He had drawn a clever sketch of her as an advertisement of his talents, and had given her two hundred of his trade cards to distribute in the locality. For this he had paid her a florin, and had promised her a percentage on every commission she brought him.

Pilleger took the card, frowning. "What is this? What do you want?"

She bowed again and left before he had time to read the card. He growled and closed the door. When he returned to his visitor he was still holding the card. He put it on his desk and turned to Kobling.

"Now," he began, trying to strike a friendly note. "Where were we?" He crossed the room towards his chair, but the barber stood in his way and would not move.

Kobling reached out and caught hold of him by the arm. His grip hurt the draper. The fingers dug into the flesh as Kobling said: "I've changed my mind. Shan't pay you any money." At any other time Pilleger would have winced and cried out at such pain, but now his terror was larger than the pain. It filled him. The fear tortured him, and he guessed Kobling's purpose. Still, he said nothing, but stood quite still in the barber's grasp.

Then, mercifully, the barber released him. He let go of him slowly, almost reluctantly, and at once Pilleger moved back in case Kobling wanted to take hold of him again. As he stepped back, he stumbled against a chair. Immediately, all the panic, which so far he had held in check, broke from him in an abject gurgle; and he put up his hands before his face, shielding himself from the black, fixed look of the other. Then he recovered his balance. His hands came down, and he was silent. He knew that he had lost his ascendancy over the barber and that he was humiliated, defeated, absolutely lost. Nothing he could say or do would ever amend that gasp of fright or the weak gesture which had accompanied it. Still, for a moment, he was relieved. Then a greater terror rose in him.

A remarkable change had come upon Kobling. He had perceived that all along the draper had been afraid of him. He was furious. He began to shout.

"You were going to take five quid a week from me!"

"But . . . but look here . . . it was only to protect you," Pilleger whispered, putting out a hand to appease him.

Kobling shouted louder than before, thrusting aside the hand. "You! You protect me! . . ."

"You agreed to it."

"You threatened me! You said . . . -My Christ! If only I'd seen through you yesterday! You said you'd go to the Police if I didn't give you money. You thought . . ."

His fury was rising like a wave in him. His face had gone pale, and his dark eyes blazed out of it so that Pilleger could

not look at them without seeing his own awful situation.

"But, Mr. Kobling . . ." he tried to say. His words made no sound against the wild flood of the barber's rage.

"You thought you could do that! You thought you could make a fool of me! You thought you could bleed me. You tried it on. You made me believe you. Now look at you. Why, you're afraid! You're shaking like a coward! Look at you. And I'll tell you why you're afraid. It's because you know I could snap your gullet with my hands. I could. I could squeeze the breath out of your throat."

Pilleger had to raise his voice to make himself heard.

"Mr. Kobling . . . don't . . . don't say such things!" The words sounded frantic, like a cry of despair and terror.

"I could kill you, Pilleger. Easily. You're not a man. You're thin. I could kill you. You tried to fasten on me. You sneaked into my place twice, when I wasn't there, and took money from my wife. You reckoned you could do a thing like that. You were afraid to tackle me. . . ."

"All right . . . it's . . . all right, Mr. Kobling. Don't think any more about it, if that's how you feel."

"But the way you tried to do it! Look at you! Look at your rotten neck. Thin. . . . I could put one hand right round it."

"No!"

"I told you!" Kobling said, as he took hold of Pilleger round the throat. "There!"

"No, Mr. Kobling! Let go."

"I told you I could. With two hands . . . right round it . . . your rat's neck. A rat's neck."

"Mr. Kobling. Please let go, please! It hurts me. Oh, it hurts me!"

Kobling sucked in his breath through his teeth.

Then Pilleger began to struggle, at first like a man wearing an uncomfortable collar, then suddenly very vigorously, lashing his body from side to side, moving backwards, trying to release himself. He stopped shouting, but his breath, tearing a passage into his lungs through that constricted throat beneath Kobling's hands, made an inhuman, monstrous sound. Sometimes his feet stamped. He kicked out at the barber with them. He scuffled as he struggled. His arms beat the air, tried to get at the barber's face, but his reach was a good deal shorter than Kobling's.

It went on for a long time. At first, Kobling only wanted to fight him, hurt him and give him a bad scare; but when the

draper began to struggle so fiercely, Kobling held him tighter, got angry, and fought him. Fought all the life out of him. Until, quite suddenly, all Kobling's anger was drained. Then he wanted to let go. He knew it was time to let go. Also, he was horrified by the way he had attacked Pilleger and hurt him. He wanted to let go, but something inside him would not let him do so. And at that moment, Pilleger struggled worse than before. His hands clawed at Kobling's. He made awful screams. He spat. His face was horrible. He was no longer human. He was mad. His hands came down and one of them scrabbled at the drawer of a little bureau against which he and Kobling had collided.

There was a revolver in that drawer. Kobling saw it as Pilleger's hand opened the drawer. Then he could not release Pilleger. Something was happening which pleased him. Out of this fierce struggle, he had been borne forward, clean out of contact with so many things which had always bound him that he felt eased, liberated from a tension in his mind which had always restricted him. The result was miraculous. All his senses felt it as the draper's struggles subsided, and the thrash and fury died out of his body, and his inhuman grunting ceased. Kobling's five senses tasted it for an instant, then in horror he dashed it from him, denying it, letting go his hold of Pilleger, standing back.

He was appalled. The thought sped across his mind: Attempted murder. . . . Then he wanted Pilleger to live, but it was too late. The draper's body swayed. His hands made strange movements. His head, with the face black and hideous, lolled back in agony. The whole body crashed headlong.

Kobling stood quite still. He was waiting for Pilleger to get up. He was waiting for him to speak. He longed for him to rise, and speak, and live. He was ready to pay him five pounds a week for the rest of his life. It would be a small price to pay for a human life.

"Pilleger!" he whispered. "It's all right. Get up now. Come on. And I'll pay you the money. . . ." Then his voice tailed away into silence, because Pilleger's body was crumpled on the floor like a tailor's model thrown there, and he knew he was dead. The barber stared at it and groaned. He knew it was futile to speak to it. The knowledge that it was dead struck at him, and for a long time it went on expanding, so that he could not accustom himself to what had happened. Then he realised what he had done, what a terrible predicament he was in, what sort of consequences would involve him.

The gaslight sunk to a tiny glimmer because Pilleger was not there to put another penny in the meter. But it was possible to see in the room, for the red glare from outside penetrated the place. The whole sky was red, flickering with crimson light.

Turning, Kobling saw tremendous flames, with columns of upwirling smoke rising with fire in their vast, cloudy shapes before the wind seized them. At his feet, when he turned his glance back into the room, was Pilleger's prone body, the face contorted in rigid agony, the skin tinged with red. Even the staring eyes were red, glowing with tremulous fire.

Kobling shut his eyes. He did not know what to do. He was trying to avoid something which he felt approaching and which he knew he would not be able to suffer. It was like a hurricane, a wave, or some other palpable form gathering itself from every distance of thought and coming towards him with awful velocity to rend his conscience.

He moved about the room, trying to fasten his shocked senses to a decision. Slowly, he began to prepare to leave. He wanted to be sure that no clues would be left. He searched the floor, examined the whole room, setting straight the disordered furniture, closing the drawer of the bureau, and taking away the revolver. On the desk he saw the card which Lizzie Crane had given to Pilleger.

BRONDOLOSI! BRONDOLOSI! BRONDOLOSI!

The greatest living artist specialising in studies of the human countenance in all the subtleties of its mood and character, its beauty and distinction, its action and quietude.

Come to me if you are beautiful!

Come to me if your features have quality!

Come to me and let me immortalise you!

There's a fortune in your face!

Terms by arrangement.

BRONDOLOSI!

He shuddered. He wanted to laugh at the way in which the card was left there so near . . . so near an extraordinary face. One that was purple, distorted, with open eyes which were taking colour from the flames. But he dared not laugh. He had to hold his breath, restrain something in himself, keep a strict control over it, not let it laugh, or sob, or shriek, or fly from him. If he were not careful it would escape him in one of those ways, and leave him exposed to something else which came clamouring at him to shout, to scream, to thrust a face at him and imprint its shape and expression and colour indelibly

on his sight while it told him that he had' killed . . . had killed . . . that he was no longer Walter Kobling, a hairdresser, married to Kit, with a daughter named Lettie. No longer a husband, a father. But a murderer. The thought came to him in all its significance, mournfully, with immense pressure.

He was cold. He felt confined by this room, and wanted to breathe pure air and get away from the body sprawled on the floor. But be careful . . . be careful. Nobody must see him leave. There was a rear entrance to this building, and noiselessly, unseen, he must slip out through it.

But he stood rooted at the door, trembling, afraid, unable to move. This hesitancy, this furtiveness and caution which he imposed on himself, were the first admissions of his guilt. He had killed Pilleger. He was no longer free as other men. This was the beginning of a new phase of his life. Only a beginning. Later, every instant of his living would be marked by such precautions, bounded by such terrors. Every moment of time would dictate them to him. He had killed Pilleger because he had tried to dominate him in a cruel manner. But dead, the draper still held him, still left something over him. The five pounds would have been more bearable than this. Five pounds a week, merely for a lifetime, instead of the weight of guilt for ever.

He became frantic at the thought of it. Get away from the hideous body! He closed the door after him and groped his way towards another door opening into a kitchen. Into a scullery. Unbolt the door leading to the yard. Slowly, noiselessly, open the door. Wait! Listen! The sky full of flames and smoke, red as hell. The jangle of fire bells. The roar of crowds. But here, silence. Look to see if there are lights in neighbouring windows. Tiptoe out and close the door carefully, making no sound. And keep close to the wall in the yard. Then go out by the alley.

It took him ten minutes at least. Once in the alley, he hurried. He had to get out of this alley before anyone came through it and saw him. He ran on his toes, slackened speed at the end, stopped and listened. Silence hereabouts, but beyond were noises. Of crowds, of bells. He slipped into the street and waited, a shadow, slow, furtive, absolutely silent, like a shadow. He looked round about him. The street was deserted. The first wave of humanity had swept out of it towards the fire. Presently, down through the Ward, from the other districts of the city, another wave would come. He must get clear before that happened. He stepped out, making towards

the fire. Something to see, somewhere to go; a multitude of people in whose press he could hide himself, lose himself. He hurried, walking in the direction of the flames, aiming at the sound of bells and the roar of voices near the fire.

It was at a large timber store near the river.

VII

He felt safer amongst the thousands of people teeming in every street thereabouts. Safer from his conscience which shrivelled under the pressure of other and more immediate thoughts. He moved with the throng, forgetting himself, sharing the excitement of the crowds as the flames tongued upwards into the sky and made light and shadow over the whole city. He became a part of something which looked with thousands of eyes, spoke with thousands of tongues, saying the same things, thinking identical thoughts, as the fire crackled and the great stacks of timber crashed thunderously into the heart of the fire. Whatever he saw, or felt, or heard, was experienced by others, by hundreds and thousands swaying and pressing forward through the streets. Nothing of himself remained. He was swept into that stream, lost amidst it. It flowed rapidly until, at a wide square where shipping companies had their offices, it was checked, broken into numerous swirling streams. Before it was the whole panorama of the fire. The intense heat from the flames held back a crowd of thirty thousand people.

The entrance to the timber store was in the square. The place stretched far back for almost a quarter of a mile from it in lanes of tall stacks between which, and hidden from view, were the joinery sheds and other premises of the firm. The whole of that extensive yard, comprising buildings, stacks of timber valued at thousands of pounds, and the vast roof built up on tall supports, was ablaze from the river to this square.

They said the fire had started in one of the strap-alleys or sawdust pits. They said the wind had blown some sparks from the funnel of an outward-bound tramp steamer on to the timber which was dry and inflammable. They said some strikers from one of the docks had deliberately fired the place. They said no, it was Communists; no, it was some Fascists who did it so that the Communists would be blamed; no, it was some sailors off a Nazi vessel in the Punter Dock. No, they said. They said yes and then no.

It was terrible to hear them say these things while flames like

gigantic replicas of those in a comfortable drawing-room grate burst upwards and detached themselves and sped away into the darkness. Sometimes, nothing but smoke rose. Dense red smoke, black smoke, white smoke, lifting like huge balloons above the roofs, and ascending and expanding and making other balloons, the whole lifting until the gale caught it as the wind roared up the river, struck its towering shape and dispersed it northwards, bursting its immense rotundity and sending it streaming in one thick level flow, low over the city. Then the flames rose again, not one flame, but twenty or more, all licking the sky, all entwining and making momentary larger flames here and there, then separating again, the gale bending all of them level and their edges and points reaching out, veering and straining, like the edges of flags fluttering frantically in a breeze. And actually roaring down into neighbouring streets! Actually flashing along roofs, like huge exploring things seeking further points of ignition. Roofs of store-houses, offices, rows of old properties, streets of slum properties. Roofs on which firemen with hoses stood. Little agile figures, dark against the red scene, their helmets flashing, some of them writhing as the huge flames licked over them and enveloped them; some of them falling into the streets below, or running along the gutters with their arms as shields before the flames, running with unbelievable speed, but finally falling, always falling.

And it made no difference that seventy or eighty streams of water were being poured from all points upon the fire. Five fully equipped engines from the city were working here. They comprised the entire fire-fighting force of the city. They had been summoned urgently. Engines from three adjoining boroughs had also answered the call. Two very efficient but, in this emergency, hopelessly inadequate, brigades from market townships twelve miles away had also arrived. Already, too, a brigade from a town thirty miles distant had reached the scene and been posted to a dangerous zone north-west of the inferno. From an important city forty miles to the east, two additional brigades had raced for an hour and arrived recently. They said the flames were visible all the way. They said they thought the whole city was afire. Smoke was over the countryside in a long, acrid column for miles. They had actually smelled the fire from the road ten miles out. They said they thought other brigades were on the way, but they were referring only to one which they had passed on the road, and which had actually never reached the fire.

It was a small, amateur brigade from a little village in the hills twelve miles away. Its members had been summoned by bell rung in the church tower. Summoned from pubs, from the inn, from shops in the village where they worked, from cottage and house. They set out exactly eight and a quarter minutes later, which was a record, for last time they had taken nine and a half because of the delay which one of them had caused. They travelled for two miles at a speed of twenty-eight miles an hour, then the engine failed. They got down and looked at it. One of them began to tinker with it, shouting to the driver every few seconds: "Try 'er now, George!" But George tried, and nothing happened, although the engine made a brave spluttering as if it were trying to make an effort, then it became silent at the moment the clutch was let in.

"Try 'er now, George!"

Still the same thing happened. The crew got down from their perches and bent over the engine. They reckoned what had happened was that it had been run too hard. Should have nursed it. Should not have driven it all out like that. Should not have driven it to death.

They closed down the bonnet and made for a nearby inn. They ordered drinks and began to play shove-ha'penny and darts. Whilst they were there, they heard another brigade approaching. They left the place and ran out to watch it. It made a great sight. It was doing quite fifty-five. It roared past, flashing and swaying, with its crew huddled against it and its bell making a brave clamour in the wind. The others cheered it loudly. Before another hour had passed two more brigades went by. The men in the inn started to argue where they came from. Some said Korley. Some said must be London. The argument became heated and finally deteriorated into angry abuse. Then there was a fight.

Meanwhile, at the fire, the brigades were working round trying to take positions to windward, where the flames curled down and threatened the houses in adjoining streets. It was necessary to stem the advance of the fire along the river bank. Some property there was dynamited to create a gap. At once, the crowds stampeded from points quite distant from that spot. The explosion frightened them. They said the oil stores along the river had caught alight. Burning oil! They scented the acrid smell of the smoke from the timber and said it was from the burning oil. They pressed back in panic, flowed back, until their pressure and motion was swallowed into the immense

thronged around them. But not until hundreds had been trampled and crushed.

The River Police had ordered all vessels into mid-stream. All docks and warehouses along the bank were emptied of staff and other employees. The Reserve of River Police had been summoned for duty, and the two fire floats had been fetched quickly down from Manning's Quay and brought into operation, adding their jets to the hundred others which were pouring into the fire.

The City Police had been ordered in force to the fire to make a cordon around the entire district and keep clear the lanes for the ambulances. All traffic across the Punter Bridge, North Bridge, Kelson Bridge, and the usual steam ferry services, was suspended. Shortly afterwards, traffic from the other wards of the city via all the routes which converged on Punter Ward was also halted. The entire Police Force, except a small Reserve which had not seen duty since the Great War, was ordered to the fire, while the Reserve took over duty in the city.

Reporters from the city newspapers were at the scene. All trunk lines from the city exchange were in full operation, and news editors in distant cities were shouting impatiently for clear connections. Editors in the Capital had summoned special staff and set organisations in motion. Three powerful 'planes had taken off to battle their way southwards against the gale. On board were senior reporters, special journalists, camera-men. They were all taking a great risk, but there was a story, news, down there, and they were willing to risk their lives to give the news to the public. Meanwhile, they sat tight, strapped in their seats, while the 'planes bumped heavily against the gale. The darkness, and the noise of the wind and the engines, and the shriek of the airscrews, were bewildering; yet at a point southwards there was something glowing like a brilliant ruby in the immense darkness of the night. Little spurts of fire were shed into the night by that ruby, and the sky all round it gleamed with red light. As the 'planes drew nearer, the fire showed as something immense, deadly. A catastrophe! The men aboard forgot their own danger and looked ahead at that belt of flame and smoke. The whole city was surely ablaze down there! What news! What stories! Pictures! Hurry her down; put her nose down and let's get there!

The 'planes landed safely on the City Airport, although one of them slid across wind and smashed its starboard wing-tip. Still, that was nothing. They had made the trip

and got here. The men tumbled out and ran across to the control-room. The Aerodrome Control Officer met them.

"You've got some nerve, flying in this gale! A miracle you ever made it. . . ."

"Thanks for spotting us and giving us the lights. What about a car down to the docks? We were told you had been wired to help us through."

"You'll never get through," he told them. They said they would try, and asked for a car, a 'bus, anything, to convey them. He said he had strict orders not to let any traffic get on the road. At that, they began to expostulate, to tell him what great papers they represented, and was it likely he would dare to read orders to them, orders which applied to the general public but not to the Press, the great Press. He said he had his orders and was going to stand by them.

They offered to buy his car from him. He laughed at them, and was adamant. They began to curse and fume. It was three miles to the city. They set out to walk, but had not gone a hundred yards on the road when they got a lift in a lorry going up. They piled in quickly, and gave the driver a pound note to hurry his lorry through.

When they reached the main road leading from the West Ward into Punter Ward, they were checked by a dense block of traffic which had been halted there. Empty motor-cars, empty 'buses, tram-cars, lorries, carts, trucks, bicycles left by their owners and drivers who had rushed on towards the fire. Some of the reporters sat down and began to write their copy at once, partly by the aid of car lamps, and partly by the lurid glow which covered the whole sky. They worked quickly and expertly. They had a story to tell already. They made a plan of action. Some were to go on to the heart of the fire, others were to work on the fringe for eye-witness accounts of minor incidents. Those minor, human incidents which supply detail and comparison to the larger incident. So get in touch with the hospitals and find out how many casualties, how many dead or wounded had been brought in. Question the Police. Listen, watch. And return to this spot in two hours. That would give time, for the flight back to the Capital would be short and rapid in this following wind. They would just make the morning edition.

But it was a fight to get anywhere near the fire, the press was so great. People were coming on foot across the city. The entire population, almost. News of the fire had gone across the city. It had spread on the wind. It had been

flashed on cinema screens, and announced from the stages of theatres.

"LADIES AND GENTLEMEN!

I want to give you an important piece of news, so that any of you who may have to cross the River to reach your homes . . . in fact any of you who have to cross the city . . . will be able to do so without trouble.

A big fire has broken out near the docks and is spreading quickly under the wind. The play will continue, but if any of you wish to leave, perhaps you will be good enough to do so during this interval. Thank you very much."

And an immediate buzz and exodus. Thousands of people were walking towards the Punter River. Women in fashionable gowns and expensive wraps. Men, escorting them in evening dress. A great crowd from cinemas which had emptied quickly when the news of the fire had been announced, from restaurants and dances, and many from the Opera House where a performance of *Don Giovanni* had been given. All jostling together through Kepnor Road, and down the side-streets to the slums, and from thence to the docks and bridges, anywhere, even to roof-tops which were being let at half a crown a head; or to houses with placards outside them.

"WINDOW SEATS. 1s. per person. GOOD VIEW. TEAS."

Somewhere in that multitude held back and herded by the Police, Kit and Lettie were standing. It was long past the child's bedtime. It must be nearly midnight. But who was asleep to-night? Who could sleep on this red, flaming night? The entire population of the city must be gathered in this dockside district. Wal would be here, somewhere. If only she could find him and talk to him instead of to the men and women beside her! Perhaps he was looking for Lettie and herself. Perhaps he was anxious for her safety. She felt a great qualm for herself and the child in this immense crowd which swayed to and fro like a wave as hundreds of people poured into it from the side-streets.

Would she ever get out of this crush alive and unhurt? Where was he? She felt strangely isolated from him, not so much physically as in a deeper, more subtle, more mysterious way. Perhaps by this furious, hot, flaming experience which she and the child shared, but which he might be missing. Where was he? She held Lettie in her arms and stared around at the faces near her. It was hopeless to look for him. But

she longed for him; and again she felt that peculiar qualm in her heart, not so much for herself now as for him.

At another point, not more than a hundred yards from where Kit and Lettie were, Dora and her husband Jim Smith were standing. They had reached this spot an hour ago, having come by car as far as the Police permitted them, and walked the rest of the way. After a little while, several men had recognised Jim, and very soon he became a sort of focus on which people surrounding him could turn to express or gather their emotions. All remarks were either addressed to him or given forth as he spoke. In low, uneasy tones, the men spoke to him, looking first at him, then at the enormous flames whose heat was felt despite the high wind blowing from the river.

"Touch and go, Jim, whether they get it under."

He nodded grimly, and the remark was echoed, like a litany.

"Touch and go whether they get it under."

"Whether they can stop it spreadin' along the docks and all them other yards," Jim said.

"Spread along all them other yards," the murmur went.

"Largest store, I should think, in the city," Jim went on, moved to speech by the vast excitement around him. "Largest out of London."

"Largest timber place in the city," people said.

"Police got their hands full," one of the men said to Jim.

"Yes, full. Big job. Big job keepin' this lot back," Jim said. "We ought to help, 'stead of just standin' round. Lot of us could help, I should think."

They made themselves into a little corps and approached a harassed Commissioner. He accepted their services at once, and asked the boxer to take his men to a road on the opposite side of the Square, where some difficulty was being found in keeping the way clear for the ambulances. Jim told Dora to make her way back to the spot where they had left the car in Kepnor Road, and to wait inside the car for him. He gave her the key and left her, making off across the Square towards the point indicated to him by the Commissioner.

At that spot Jimsey Jones was standing with a crowd of seamen from the boarding-house.

"That's Jim Smith!" he exclaimed, pointing out the boxer to the sailors. "Jim Smith, the Middle-Weight Champion."

"What? That fellow there?"

"Is Jim Smith, the Champion," Jimsey said.

"Looks like the Mate on the *Grinlock Head*," the man said.

"Look! Jus' like that beggar we 'ad on the *Grinlock*!" He

went on addressing his associates. "Look at 'im! Looks like a bloody chunk o' rock!"

"Looks like."

"Tell you, it's Jim Smith!" Jimsey said.

"Jus' like that Mate. Jus' like. Remember 'im? Rotten sot."

The boxer and his men joined hands with the Police at that point and began to force the crowd back.

"Back! Back there! For the ambulance . . . back!"

Very slowly the crowd gave way. A lane was made. And suddenly into it one wild, solitary figure was erupted. Lizzie Crane. Hysterical, throwing into the air a little packet of cards, then waving her hands while she screeched, laughed, shouted. An ambulance swerved round the corner, its bell beating louder than all the cries of warning from the throng at that place. One louder, hoarse voice roared: "Get back! Look out!" And somebody in Smith's gang rushed out and caught Lizzie in time, throwing her to the opposite side against the thick black press there. The mob swallowed her. She was silent, breathless. Then she groaned and looked about her and saw Jimsey.

She clutched his arm and steadied herself. "Jimsey! He was with Andy Pilleger when I went to the shop to leave a card. That Kobling was there with him."

She spoke in a murmur. Her words did not reach his ears, but were torn by the impact of sounds around her. He leaned towards her and tried to listen, imagining she was telling him something about her own experiences this night.

"Look at it, Lizzie! Ever see anything like this before?" he exclaimed. Then the crowd at that corner swayed, and he lost sight of and contact with her. She was swallowed into the crowds and borne away, as he himself was slowly carried on the crush and swirl of humanity thereabouts.

They said the fire was gaining. They said it would blaze for days. It was hopeless to try to quench it, for the high wind fanned it, threw sparks from it on adjoining properties, some of which were already alight. Two warehouses. Both of those warehouses were near a large bonded store, and further along the river bank there were wharves with goods piled high, awaiting trans- . . . whilst immediately behind them was an oil depôt on which the clouds of smoke from the fire frequently descended. Thick smoke, heavy with ash and alight with sparks and flying, flaring fragments thrown aloft by the draught from the fire.

The heat was intense. Already some ancient property near the timber yard had cracked, collapsed, and taken fire. This minor blaze had been extinguished within a few minutes, but some old houses in the street beyond had lost their windows which had cracked, then burst. The wind which came off the immense flames was scorching. People fled, or turned away from its hot breath which consumed the air itself, burning everything. Through the open window-frames, sparks and larger burning fragments were gusted, immediately setting light to curtains, bedding, clothing. In the space of a few minutes, dozens of those small slum dwellings were ablaze. Their flames rose in a long line, licking the darkness, linking with the high flames from the warehouses near the bonded store, swallowing in fire the intervening properties.

Behind the slums, there were several tall mills. Paper mills. Corset factories. Rope walks. Cardboard-box manufactories. All of them were in the direct path of the fire. Beyond them, last of all, was a large paint and varnish store. Archibald Benmore and Company, Limited.

"Benmore's! If it reaches Benmore's?"

"What! Reach Benmore's? That's half a mile along the river!"

To the hundreds of people on the Punter Bridge, the light from the flames showed a tall hoarding: "BENMORE. PAINT AND VARNISH." Sometimes the hoarding was hidden by long columns of swiftly flowing smoke. After one such column had cleared, the wind continued in its lull. Then, quite clearly and unmistakably, the spectators on the Punter Bridge, as well as all the thousands gathered on the other bridges and the west bank, saw a long, thin flame suddenly leap from Benmore's premises and sink behind the buildings the next instant, being followed immediately by a belch of black smoke.

Over the multitudes watching near the river, a silence fell instantly. Silence followed by a concerted intake of breath as another flame curled upwards from the same spot. Then a great cry of horror as many flames rose from points in those premises.

It was stupefying to watch those flames bursting, and to realise what had happened. Half a mile of dock-side premises roaring in flame to a depth of a quarter of a mile, consuming everything in that strip, igniting houses and mills far behind, the fierce wind fanning and lifting the flames, threatening the whole city. The spectacle no longer excited. It was no longer a local blaze providing interest and news. It had gone beyond

that, into the bounds of catastrophe. It had become a major disaster, to be felt by all who watched it, to be dreaded. Men and women in hundreds stared, shuddered, wept openly.

Three brigades were detached from the operations and ordered to make a detour and take positions north of the fire in its path. There, working quickly, they were to flood buildings, make gaps, create a barrier of drenched premises which the flames could not devour.

Thus, it became at this time a struggle between two elements: fire and water. The fire fanned by the wind: the water directed by man. The whole city watched it anxiously. All the civic authorities were at important vantage points. Troops from a garrison along the coast were drafted to the city to assist the Police and the Brigades.

The three brigades which had been sent northwards of the fire could be seen taking positions on high roofs. From those places they began to turn hoses upon neighbouring buildings, and to attempt to work right up to the very wall of fire which crept nearer to them. But what happened was simply that the immense heat of that fierce wall of fire dried everything it approached, and eventually consumed it, swallowed it, transformed it into fire. Men worked at its face in that scorching putrid air until their clothing was sodden, charred, pulped by alternate water, smoke, heat, until they were dragged unconscious, or collapsed, or until the flames burst upon them, licking down from the sky in tongues moved by the lash of the wind, roaring along whole streets. Flames that were sentient, searching the vantage points and straining along the path of the wind to encircle, to destroy, to leap, to burn the whole city. It was hopeless to fight them any longer. It was necessary to surrender those points and retreat and make a defence further off, to create an impassable barrier, to surrender the timber store, the warehouses, the factories, Benmore's, half a dozen smaller premises, hundreds of houses, and the whole of one of the quays. To retreat as far as the great graving dock, a mile up river. Coil in the hoses, draw down the shoots, assemble crews and reserves, hurry! Hurry! Race with the gale! Retreat to the graving dock. Put a cordon of troops far out in the interior of the Ward, with others to dynamite whole rows of houses if the fire spreads that far! Make a line on your maps! Draw a line of defence! Give all this to the flames, but no more! Draw off all the brigades from this point and send them north, to the graving dock, a mile up river, then wait! Wait, and pray too; pray that the wind

would abate, or rain begin, and no building in the interior of the Ward catch fire. A solid mile of dockside blazing! Millions of pounds' worth of property going up in red, yellow, blue smoke and fire, making the sky an appalling dome of crimson, and the river a bloody stream flowing seawards!

They said the fire would not go beyond the graving dock or leap the tributary which entered the river at that point. They said that, and waited fearfully, knowing that the fire could leap that obstacle, had leaped wider paths. They waited, as if by saying no, no, it won't, couldn't, too wide, the statement from so many tongues, so many hearts, would make a barrier or quench those flames along the bank. But it was unbearable to wait there and watch and think of what might happen if that creeping rim of fire strode across the dock and the tributary. It was impossible to support the tension of anxiety and terror which, rising out of all hearts, became a vast hush, a palpitating silence broken only by sobs, an occasional shriek of agony, a murmur like a prayer whenever another building was engulfed.

On the bridges, in the squares, in the surrounding streets, people dropped from exhaustion. Police who had been on duty since early morning and would have gone off duty at seven o'clock or earlier, in the normal course of things, were worn out. They were relieved by troops and permitted to rest in secluded corners for a brief respite. Amongst one such squad was the young constable who was seeking promotion into the detective force. He was in plain clothes, with a constable's armlet. He had been on duty opposite Pilleger's shop in Kepnor Road until half-past seven, when the first wave of people had swept down through the Ward towards the fire. An Inspector had appeared through the confusion and ordered him to report at a point near the docks. Since then he had been working with other forces hereabouts. He was dazed, played out. He stretched himself beside twenty other exhausted officers and was silent. None of them was able to speak, all being utterly exhausted. Some shut their eyes and rolled about as if in pain. Others were limp, sitting in strange attitudes, with their eyes gaping and empty; some were asleep, others barely awake looking about them as if lost. This fire was a nightmare. It was the most awful thing that had ever happened in the city. It stunned the mind, obliterated thought, made memory indistinct, overthrew reason and proportion, and left a monstrous impression of noise, flame, smoke, confusion. An impression which had entered the mind by every

sense and would never fade. It drove out other impressions, made other things seem vague or trivial. It made the theft of money from Glennett's Mill something of no consequence, and his duty opposite Pilleger's shop in Kepnor Road equally unimportant.

An officer came running towards them.

"You men! Form up and get round to the next street at once! Get through quickly! Keep together and report to the officer at the far end!"

The young constable struggled to his feet, and made off with the others in the direction indicated. What had happened was that as soon as the brigades had been despatched northwards, thousands of people had stampeded from that quarter and come out towards the bridges and open spaces to avoid destruction or watch the fire. For a time, the Police had succeeded in holding them in check at a spot where they were quite safe but without a good chance to watch what was happening. Then suddenly, the cordon had been forced, and the immense crowd which had been standing for so many hours near the timber store (which was the seat of the outbreak) was swept aside and pressed towards the bridges and outlying streets by the influx and impact of this new multitude. Now it was necessary to check the latter, to break it up, divert it, as well as stem the flow of the first crowd towards the river.

When the first crowd had been impelled towards the river, Kobling had been carried amidst it to a corner near a street leading southwards. He was not sorry to be moved thus. He had been wedged tightly in the throng for nearly four hours. Now he wanted to move his limbs, stand free. He took his chance, and gradually tore his way through the fringe of the crowd to an open space. He went a little way down the street and sat down on a window-sill. Like a vague pain which must sooner or later be considered, there was something working through the dead weight of all his senses. He knew what it was, and he wanted to let it come forth from his confused mind so that he could know the extent of it, its size, its implications. But he knew that he was not ready for it. His spirit was not adjusted to bear it, his life not yet accustomed to the remotest realisation of it. So let it all stay down there, under the surface of consciousness, untouched, unbidden to his conscience. Let it remain as it was at present, like a pain. Let it continue like that, and perhaps it would resolve itself and pass altogether from even the remotest exploring tentacle of thought, never to rise again, never to disturb him.

Or, if it were likely to tear its way to his mind, let the victim lying in his room be consumed. Let the city burn, as hysterical people around him had cried that it would. Let the fire stream across it and engulf it so that nothing would remain of his deed. For if the flames would only bend in the wind and reach down to that place where Pilleger's body was sprawled, and burn . . . burn the body to a charred thing no longer recognisable as a human body, then . . . then he could contend successfully with this pain of horror at the bottom of his soul. He could make a compromise with himself, with the part of him which held that pain, and the part which refused to admit its pulse. He could make one person of himself again. He would have nobody but himself to answer to. Nobody would ever know what he had done. So, burn . . . burn the Ward, the whole of Punter. Let it all rise in flame and sink into ash and fragment. Let the past be purged, erased in that way, so that he could be another person, start again, find Kit and Lettie and put his arms around them and go away with them.

He began to walk south, far down-river, away from the crowds to a point where the estuary widened and there were marshes, stony foreshores, too, where all the rubble of the tides and sewage rimmed the stones, and wide weed-grown plots owned by the Harbour Board after reclamation from the sea.

He saw the tide flowing seawards, the ebb tide. The wind carried the smell of the salt sea, and the odour of the scum from the river. He took off his hat and lifted his face to it. He felt the prick of rain on his skin. Rain! It was surely only the lift of spray from the waves which the high wind piled. But, at every gust, he felt the nettle of moisture brush his skin, then he tried to hope that the rain would not fall. Rain! Rain that would quench the fire! He shuddered, and the hope that had carried him along a path of possible restoration, passed from him.

He turned and looked back at the city. The fire was still raging, flaring along the dockside and casting its gleams even to this distant point where he stood. But the wind was abating; and from the clouds which were piled in the sky, a thin drizzle of rain was beginning to fall. He wandered aimlessly near the foreshore a little longer, then slowly he began to return.

Slowly at first, thinking of Kit and Lettie, thinking of all the cherished aspects of his life with them, thinking how precious Kit and Lettie were to him, how beautiful his life was if only he had known it, thinking with anguish of the common round

—the laughter and talk and the way the sun shone in his place of an afternoon just before Kit brought him a cup of tea. Thinking of all this. As someone who was regretting what was taken from him. It was completed. He saw it as something which was concluded for him, and only now when it was over, when all its exquisite moments of love and happiness were past, did he value them, tasting them in recollection and realising that never again, never in reality would the chance return to live that life again.

And at that he started to run. Perhaps by reaching Kit and Lettie again he would be in time to snatch from the ruins of his life something fruitful of all those days, something which he might carry like a seed with him into this new, terrible existence and plant there, nourish, and bring to bloom. Perhaps this realisation of things ended was no more than a momentary vision which would never become real. Perhaps! He sped with that word vibrating in his mind. He must seek something of the past, pluck it out and carry it with him like a torch in the promised darkness. He must find Kit and his child.

He ran swifter than ever. When he reached the lower end of the Ward, the crowds were leaving the scene. The fire was waning. It was under control, checked by the tributary of the Punter, River and the great width of the graving dock. The rain was falling heavily, and the wind had dropped to a mere sullen and occasional puff. He found it hard to hurry in the crowd. He longed to burst his way through this slow procession. His impatient heart, half in horror and panic, half in longing for Kit, for rest, for shelter, urged him. But he checked himself.

He reached the saloon at last and let himself in. An anxiety that they might still be out caught him, but passed the next moment as he heard Kit call him.

He ran through to her and turned swiftly to find her. She was waiting there in the darkness for him. Without a word he held her, kissed her tenderly, hungrily, not daring to speak, hardly venturing to think, but only holding her, receiving her kisses, returning them, clinging to her, but feeling all the time that through her embraces she was unconsciously expressing a prescience that an end had been reached of a period of their lives, and that what was before them frightened her with its unfathomable darkness.

day, conscious in his dreams of the magnitude of yesterday's events and the especial fact which was to give so heavy a shade to all future days for him. That burden would not leave him, but remained attached to him by bonds which, in sleep, he succeeded in loosening but never snapping. They held him still. He dreamed that he ran swiftly, skirted flame and smoke, dodged and turned, but was ever pursued by those shapes which, still attached to him, floated behind him like the folds of a cloak.

At half-past seven the alarm clock sounded. He was wide awake at once. For an instant, his sensibilities leaped to gather joyously all the familiar routine, as his tortured spirit had reached out last night towards the same vision; then the awful sickness of his soul rose and informed him, snatching out of attainment that happy picture and leaving him this despair. It was over all his senses. It was the taste of fear, the smell of fire and smoke and river-scum, the sight of Pilleger's horrible face, the sound of breath forcing a passage towards empty lungs, the touch of cold flesh. He mourned the end of his life thus far, and stood apprehensively before this new day.

Yet he had these few moments before Kit woke, in which to decide what to do. He knew they were the last moments of peace and security he would ever savour. The instant Kit awoke, the character of his life would begin its new tempo; and after that, nothing of former days would remain. It would be obliterated, ended for ever by the pressure of this problem which faced him.

Lying quite still in bed and listening to all the sounds of morning in the city outside, he felt as if that world which he could hear stirring to activity were hostile to him. It had the character and potency of a force of enemies marshalling against him. Awaiting him in a vast flock, they were a mere moment or two distant from him. He was so conscious of their imminence that he held his breath in terror. He knew they would burst upon him; he felt them nearby, awaiting him. He asked himself what defence he could make against them. What should he do when Kit awoke and spoke to him, chattering about the fire? How could he look at her, smile, touch her, without betraying himself? And how would he be able to talk with his customers, how conceal his guilt, how comment as men would expect him to when the fire and the murder were discussed?

These grim necessities awaited him, and in the final moments before he engaged them, he prayed for some access of wisdom

as yet unknown to him. Wisdom, cunning, in new guises, new pulses, new qualities to meet this immeasurable predicament. Then rising noiselessly so as not to disturb Kit, he dressed and went downstairs. It was still dark. He switched on the light, went through the shop, and opened the street door.

Standing there in the half-light of dawn, he breathed the damp air. Rain was falling. He lifted his face to it and felt it touch his skin with cool, refreshing drops. A soft wind blew from the south-west, and the faint odour of burning oil and other matter which persisted on the air, was dispelled for a while by the fresh, strong smell of the sea.

That odour caught and stung his senses, gave him sudden vigour and hope, put a current of new courage into him as he had recently prayed that something might. At once, an impulse to fly came to him. It made sound in all the emptiness of his heart where, only a moment before, the silence of fear and uncertainty had hung like the stillness of a tomb. But he could not answer it, could not accept it. His friends and customers and neighbours, hurrying past to work, called to him, and as he waved a desultory hand (more from habit than intention) to them, he knew that he was already embarked on a personal journey which precluded his return to the world of peace and happiness of which those people were inhabitants. He could not escape. He stood watching them hurry by. He wanted yet a few more minutes of the old life, a few moments of its monotonous familiarity before it faded altogether from him.

At last he turned back into the saloon and closed the door. Standing there, he saw the empty chairs and all the paraphernalia of his trade. Here, in this space, within an hour or two, his agony would commence. He trembled slightly and moved slowly into the room behind.

He prepared breakfast. He had no appetite; the sight of food revolted him, as did the smell. He drank a cup of tea, and setting Kit's breakfast on a tray with Lettie's, he carried it up to her and set it on the table near her bed. He hardly dared trust himself to awaken her. He stood looking down at her dark hair lying in fine, abundant clusters over the pillow. Her long eyelashes curved over her cheeks. Her lips were slightly parted. The whole countenance was sensuous in sleep. As he watched her, she stirred, turned slightly, and nestled sleepily into the bed's warmth again with a movement almost voluptuous. Then she became aware of his absence from the bed. Her eyes opened slightly. She saw him standing near the bed.

Light entered those splendid eyes then; they opened fully and shone at him. Colour and life flowed into her cheeks and lips and muscles. He saw it all. It was like a revelation, wondrous to him because he had never observed it before. His heart filled with an anguish of love as he watched her and realised that he had lost her, was severed from her by his crime, had no longer any right to her. His deed had set a gulf between them. She was gone with all the tender, precious things of his past, and he was alone, filled with his problems. Looking at her now, and smiling wanly at her, his heart mourned the loss of her. She smiled back at him. She could smile now, but later, within an hour, when she discovered what had happened to Pilleger, she would turn a different look on him. Then, unhappily, the problem would become partly hers.

"Here's breakfast for you," he said quietly. "Don't bother to get up yet. Finish your sleep."

She sighed gratefully. "I'm stiff, standing down there in the Square. And that tired! I dreamt about fire all night."

Lettie ran in to them as she was speaking. At once Kobling saw her as the one soul whose love for him would not be impaired by what he had done. He lifted her and kissed her.

"Jump into bed with Mum and have your breakfast," he said.

He went downstairs. He was thirsty. He poured himself another cup of tea and sat down at the table to drink it. He was tired. Putting his head on his hands joined above the cup, he closed his eyes and mused, trying to stem the shifting visions that tormented him. He had no power over them. They moved across his mind in a tedious, terrific procession.

The morning newspaper falling through the box startled him. He sprang to his feet. His chair overturned. It took him several seconds in which to recover himself. He went unsteadily into the saloon and lifted the paper. His long thoughts were interrupted, his nightmare broken. But what remained was the bitter knowledge that those visions were not the features of a dream, but were the recollections of something that had occurred in reality. Something he had done. A murder. For which he would have to answer. But how, in what manner? The question frightened him.

He opened the newspaper and read the flaring headlines. After that he searched every inch of the paper for news of the discovery of Pilleger's body. But the whole edition from start to finish told only of the fire. The disaster without parallel in the city's history. The shocking loss of life: nine men of the

brigades, and eighteen civilians who had been trapped in their homes. As well as one hundred and ninety-five casualties of a serious sort, and over two hundred and fifty minor injuries. Property valued at millions of pounds reduced to ruin. Goods, valued at hundreds of thousands, consumed. A whole mile of the docks gutted, burnt out, still smouldering. Pictures on the back page. Eye-witness accounts. Men who had escaped by miraculous chances, firemen, police who had rescued people. Bravery, courage, resource. Death. Rescue.

He sighed, and folding the sheets, tossed them on the table. Nothing of Pilleger. No eye-witness accounts, no spectators, no sound or movement. Only silence. Only his own suspense until they found the body, and then a new, different kind of suspense while they made headlines and shouted them and showed placards and cried the news across the city, and the Police hurried to the shop. That was the prospect which this day brought for him.

He was exhausted. His sleep had not rested him or restored even the faintest hope by which he might front the perils of the day before him. His courage drooped and quailed at the efforts which he begged from it; and in final despair he asked himself again how he might conceal his guilt, how talk and laugh and recount his experiences at the fire as his customers would expect him to; how stand the scrutiny of his apprentice who would work near him all day and hear him?

He had no answer to make to these questions. He had no plan, no resources of wit, nothing of his customary buoyancy. All had gone, drooped out of him, evaporated. His absolute lack of defences shook the last particle of hope in him. After that he dared not ponder any longer. He stood up. Henceforth, he must close his mind to these fearful considerations. He must resist them, give himself a chance to recover, for somewhere, in his body, in his blood and muscle there must be a reserve waiting to be summoned. There must be an instinct. He had read, heard . . . an instinct for self-preservation. Something elemental, a last shelter, something from the blood and the elemental longing for life. So, give his faith a chance. Meanwhile, he must occupy himself, accept each moment as it fell, and anticipate nothing. Live in the present.

He went into the shop to shave. Lighting the geyser, he drew off hot water and stood before one of the mirrors. His features shocked him. They were grey and taut, fixed in an expression which reflected only one thing: his abject fear.

He tried to smile. He lifted the muscles into a semblance

of his old cocksure grin. The result was monstrous. The smile was like a mask, one of those things with the bulge and outline and contour of the human smile, but lacking flash and substance. He lathered his face and went on shaving, choosing a safety razor which he had not used for months. After that he stripped to the waist and washed himself in cold water.

That was refreshing. The cold water stung his skin and brought the blood into better circulation. As he dried himself, his limbs and splendid torso fell automatically into their old motions and stances. He was suddenly aware of it. It pleased him. He moved rapidly, and the pulse of his heart increased. So there was something! There was an instinct! There was a last reserve, rich and proud in the body!

His heavy thoughts drew off like mist under sunlight. His fears hid themselves. He tossed away the towel and went through several exercises, swinging his arms in a rhythm, breathing evenly all the time, then putting his hands on his hips and bending his trunk sideways, forwards, backwards. He saw his body reflected in the mirror. It looked supple and strong, and his old pride in its perfection shot through his spirit and inspired him. He was a man. He had this fine body. His hands clenched in anger as he thought of what the miserable Pilleger had attempted to do. Blackmail, intimidation! As if he were some weak, timid little pimp! Rage poured into his heart, and he muttered: "... thought. Thought he could do that to me! Thought he could! Make me afraid of him, of him! That specimen! Best thing . . . best thing I ever did! Get hold of him and . . . and . . ."

He got no further than that. He could not bring his rage that far. It resisted him, strained back, and suddenly expiring left him strangely cold and obliterated.

He drew breath and, gathering his jacket, returned to the room. Kit and Lettie were coming downstairs. Hearing them, he faltered, wondering how he could face them. The paper was on the table before him. Quickly, he reached for it, opened it and sat as if engrossed in what his eyes saw.

His body took the sprawl of one deeply absorbed in the page. He did not look up. He read one sentence and held his eyes riveted on it, all his senses alert for an indication of Kit's mood upon which he might construct his own attitude when she spoke.

"I say, Wal, the fire . . ." she began.

"Should read what it says. What it says here. Says a mile . . . a mile along the river . . . all burnt. Lot of lives lost.

Biggest fire in the British Isles since . . . says since the Great Fire of London, says . . ."

She leaned over him and read the headlines. "Here, read about it," he went on. He pushed the paper to the left and got up. She sidled into his chair and drew the newspaper to her, without a word to him. She was immediately absorbed. Seeing his chance, he turned and left her and went to open the saloon. As he unlocked the street door, he trembled involuntarily. He had opened his door now, and soon the first customer would enter. Soon he would hear cries from the direction of Pilleger's shop, hear people running, hear the excited chatter as a crowd gathered about the draper's door. Then? He tried to imagine what would happen. His apprentice arrived at that moment.

Without looking at him, Kobling said: "I suppose you went down to see the fire last night?"

"I was on the Punter Bridge," the boy said.

"I bet you weren't home until four this morning. They didn't get the traffic clear from here until after three," Kobling went on. The boy grinned. Kobling shot him a glance. "This is Friday," he said. "Busy day. And another one tomorrow. You'll wish you hadn't been at the fire, time to-night comes. You'll be too tired to speak, let alone work. That's how I feel: too tired to open my mouth."

The first customer came in as Kobling said this. A stout, loquacious confectioner who squatted in the chair and began to relate his experiences near the scene of the fire.

Kobling yawned. "Wasn't home until near five. Was out from eight until then, but never saw much except the bit near the timber yard. Couldn't get very far from there. Got jammed in a crowd and had to stay there."

The confectioner went on talking under the lather which the boy was working over his face. Kobling listened. His sense of hearing extended beyond the saloon, and explored the Road near Pilleger's shop. In fancy he stood there. He no longer heard what the confectioner was saying. He waited at the draper's door. It was past nine o'clock, and the assistant was ringing. She waited patiently, for sometimes Pilleger did not answer her immediately. This morning, however, he was a very long time coming. She ventured to ring again. Still no answer. After that, she stood in the doorway, and did not trouble to ring again for fear Mr. Pilleger would be annoyed at her apparent impatience.

Now the apprentice had finished the lathering. Kobling

stopped the razor. Nothing, he thought as he stepped to the chair and made the first firm stroke with the razor, nothing is as bad as the imagination depicts it, by the time the moment comes.

But he was still only part of the way towards the inevitable climax. It would happen any moment now. Then he would have to simulate horror, surprise, when all the time he would know, would be the only one who did know, and would want only to avoid all news of the affair. The assistant was waiting in Pilleger's doorway. Presently, she would ring again, wait for a while, perhaps stroll along the terrace and ask a neighbour if Mr. Pilleger had gone out. Later, she would become alarmed and ringing again (this time for several seconds) she would suddenly experience a peculiar presentiment, lose her grip on herself, and fly to a neighbour.

The loquacious confectioner went on talking as soon as the barber had gone round his face with the razor. Kobling murmured occasionally to express his agreement with an opinion. The boy waited to sponge the confectioner's face.

Then the door opened. On the threshold stood Pilleger's assistant. Kobling's heart swung in his breast as she spoke.

"Oh, Mr. Kobling, have you seen Mr. Pilleger this morning? I've been ringing for a quarter of an hour and can't get a reply. I thought perhaps he might have come here for a shave."

Kobling slowly shook his head. "Never comes here for a shave, Miss."

"You haven't seen him at all?"

Again he shook his head.

"You go back and give him another ring, Miss," the fat man said. "He's asleep. He's overslept, like a lot more of us this morning. He must have been out half the night!"

He laughed. Kobling and the boy smiled. That helped to steady the woman. She felt her presentiments dispelled, and was able to smile. "Oh, yes, wasn't it dreadful? We're lucky the wind didn't blow it this far. Whatever would have happened, if the rain hadn't come and the wind stopped?"

"Bad business," the confectioner said.

"Yes, you're right," the woman said. "I'll go and try again. Perhaps Mr. Pilleger is awake by now."

Awake by now! Perhaps! Kobling almost groaned. Then his thoughts swerved, and he stood quite still for an instant, wondering if the woman knew anything of the seventy-four pounds. Had Pilleger told her? Did he confide such affairs

to her? Did she know? Was there a ledger account which would tell the whole tale?

He need not have bothered himself with these apprehensions. Pilleger, to his assistant, was a man of honourable reputation who never stooped to shady methods of business. And Pilleger himself, realising the value of her opinion of him, had always taken good care to hide anything of a doubtful nature from her. He told her nothing of the loans he made to customers. He kept secret account of the smaller ones; but of the larger loans from which he had always reaped such substantial interest there was no record.

The confectioner was saying something about Pilleger.

"Chap I can't stomach. Might be all right. . . . Never knew much about him. Suppose he's all right, in his way."

"Not a bad fellow," Kobling said.

He followed the customer to the door and stood there, leaning against the jamb and trying to calm himself. He could scarcely breathe. He felt as if his lungs were shrinking, his brain boiling. Behind him, the door opened and Kit came out.

Words came from his lips before he could prevent them.

"That woman from Pilleger's was here just now. Said she couldn't get an answer. Said she'd been ringing a quarter of an hour."

Kit lifted the bottle of milk from the doorway, and held it closely while she peered out along the terrace of shops.

"There's a crowd round the door," she said. "Here, hold this," she exclaimed, thrusting the bottle into his hands and hurrying off.

He returned to the saloon and went through to the kitchen. He put down the bottle and stood irresolutely. Minutes passed. He prayed fervently that no customer would come until Kit had returned. His breath shuddered in and out of his trembling lips. The inevitability of this impending crisis was too much for him. He clenched his fists and put them to his face. His body was rigid. He heard the door bell ring, and Kit's steps race through the saloon and into the kitchen.

"Wal! Wal!"

He could not move. He stood as if he were expecting a blow, his clenched fists still pressed to his face, his breathing checked.

"Wal! Oh, Wal!"

Still he did not move. And that was how she found him.

Her cry ceased on an expiring breath, and she was quite silent for several seconds, then she gasped, while he stood

rooted there, with all the terms of his guilt inscribed plainly on him for her to see.

She, too, stood quite still, every movement abruptly checked. He almost saw the thought strike her and take substance in her mind and reflect itself in her features. The idea that he . . . that he had murdered Pilleger! Her lips opened wide, her hands began to make gestures; then the colour passed suddenly from her face and she tottered headlong.

He caught her as she fell, and carried her to the settee. He tried to revive her. It was futile. She had gone into a deep swoon. He rose and hurried into the saloon, hardly knowing what he was doing. He supposed this was the end, that this was the moment he had dreaded all along: the moment when he could no longer conceal his guilt, when he would shrink back from the storm, lose control. The saloon was empty.

He gaped about him for an instant, then he returned to Kit. He held her head down, lightly slapped her cheeks, chafed her hands. She remained unconscious. He crushed her to him and covered her face with hasty kisses, as if he were taking farewell of her; and suddenly releasing her, he got to his feet and filled a glass with water and poured a little through her lips, splashed some lightly over her face.

She stirred, opened her eyes. He whispered to her: "There . . . there . . . took a bad turn. Got a nasty shock. You're all right now, though. Take it easy. . . ."

She stared at him without speaking. He dared not look at her. Whatever she saw as she watched him, frightened her, for all at once she moaned and began to cry out; but before the utterance reached any pitch, she fainted again.

He put down the glass beside her, and running to the door which opened on the room immediately behind the saloon, he shut it and returned to her to continue his efforts to revive her.

At last she opened her eyes. He gave her the glass.

"Take hold of this, Kit. Sip it. Keep steady now, keep steady, for God's sake. I'll have to go back to the shop. Keep steady. Take things easy. Keep a grip . . ."

He got up and left her there and returned to the saloon. The boy was back, agog with news. A customer entered.

"Wal, something happened at Pilleger's," he began.

"He's been killed!" the boy exclaimed.

"They said that. Some of the women said that," the customer went on.

The boy went on in an excited babble: "It's right. I saw

him. On the floor. He was on the floor, and he was all bunched up, and his face was . . . oh, his face was all screwed up, and his eyes was open."

The two men looked at him. "Go on!"

And it was like that for the rest of that long day. Nothing but repeated talk on the subject of the fire and the murder. And the sight of Kit's pale, startled face. And her silence.

When, in the evening, he closed the saloon and went into the room, there was still that hush in her manner. She set a meal for him and left him. He was ravenous. He ate slowly and hungrily. He knew that Kit was somewhere in the house, but he dared not call her or go in search of her.

Long after he had finished his meal, he sat at the table, his fingers rolling the crumbs which were scattered on the cloth. His thoughts explored a future which was dark as a wilderness under the night and full of unpredictable perils. Sometimes they flew quickly, impetuously; then he tried to curb them as if he were afraid that they would discover to him the most obvious dangers behind which were hundreds of other perils. He tried to direct them carefully, to make them consider his plight in a reasonable manner; but a mist seemed to fall on them, and the same panic as before caught him. He could find no solution at all, no peace, no relaxation or hope.

He was tired out. He switched off the light and flung himself on the settee, sleeping heavily there all night, sleeping, dreamlessly, and waking cold but refreshed when the alarm clock in the bedroom above sounded through the place.

He sat up and stretched himself, and throwing off the rug and overcoat which covered him he stood up and moved his body. It felt fresh, vigorous, detached from all the depressing, harassing thoughts which imprisoned his mind. It was like a mountain affording him strength and encouragement. It restored him slightly.

He heard Kit stirring in the room above, and a little later her steps sounded on the stairs. He braced himself to meet her, but at the last moment could not find the courage to stay there and encounter her. He slipped through the room into the saloon and began to wash. He heard the morning newspapers drop through the door, and when he had towelled himself, he picked them up and sat down in one of the chairs to read them.

His eyes scanned the dark headlines.

"SHOCKING AFFAIR IN KEPNOR ROAD"

"LOCAL DRAPER DONE TO DEATH IN ROOM BEHIND SHOP"

"DISTRICT IN FERMENT OF UNEASINESS"

He read down the pages, searching for anything that might tell him what enquiries the Police were making and what results had so far been gleaned. He began to feel afraid again. And that uneasiness which the whole locality felt, communicated itself to him, and it seemed to him that the consequences of his deed were not only to be reckoned by his own fearful heart, but were already felt most apprehensively by the inhabitants of the Ward. Then he felt the full horror of his crime as something monstrous, horrible beyond everything which he had ever imagined was horrible. His soul floated in an ocean of terror and could not reach any haven.

Another long and arduous day was before him, and he groaned at the prospect. If only he could go away, hide, remain in solitude and silence, and accustom himself to what had happened. But he knew that the chance would not come to him. He must endure every moment, every hour, make his way through them, trust his fate, try to arm himself in the very face of these attacks. That was all life had to offer him now.

He threw aside the papers and opened the saloon. Outside, a thick, impenetrable mist from the sea covered the city. He breathed it. It was cold. It swept past him into the saloon, and at once he came in and shut the door.

He heard Kit go upstairs carrying a tray on which crockery rattled. Slowly, he returned to the room. His breakfast was set there. He looked at it, but found no appetite for it. His body, which a few minutes previously had been so fresh and vitalising to his sluggish mind, was now under the spell of anxiety. He felt ill, tired again.

Slumping into a chair, he sipped his tea and wondered what this misty day would bring forth for him.

PART THREE

THE FUGITIVE

I

THE mist remained all day, invading the saloon whenever the door opened. And all that day, under the compulsion of the endless conversations which the crowded saloon held, he was obliged to put in his word and express his opinions, his heart constantly springing in panic, his soul revolted by its secret and all the pretences which guarded it. If only he could have looked up and seen through the wide window the blue sky, the clouds, the sunlight, and felt a wider world than this narrow one which the mist made in his saloon!

But he was hemmed in there. He had to take his customary rôle of arbiter, expert, judge, without betraying his secret. And it was ironic, it was bitterly awful, that for once in very truth, he was the one with greater knowledge. Indeed, he knew all there was to know, but for once dared not imply that he did. And at first, strangely, he had not found it difficult to enact his part. Men spoke of Pilleger; saying, a queer one, a miser, not much of a chap after all, poor devil; unfriendly sort of fellow; and out of the dregs of his thought, Kobling felt indignation rise against that loathsome person. What Pilleger had tried to do to him! A good thing he was out of the way! A good thing, the rat, the sucker. Against all the world, against his own conscience and the horrified spirits of his neighbours, he sent forth his retort, a soundless thing, meant only to be heard by his own soul, taken cognisance of by his own terrified spirit. Thus, no answer could or would reach him. He wanted none from mankind. He wanted only a justification from his conscience of the principle which had moved his life and brought him to that crime.

He lifted his elbows as he busied himself over his customers. He exulted secretly over his deed. He reassured himself. Let the Police search and make enquiries! Let them come and question him if they liked! There was no button this time! He had left no clue this time, unless . . . unless it was in his conscience, waiting to be probed, or in the reflection of his uneasy thoughts as they showed in his eyes. Otherwise he was safe.

Thus, well on into the day, he encouraged himself, until all the fuel in that lamp of fury and courage and confidence was dissipated. Then the flame began to sink. His flagging nerves strung themselves for further efforts, but there was nothing to sustain them. His hollow heart, without light, and his body from which heat and hope had died, rendered nothing in response to his demand. His blood seemed to have dried in his veins, leaving his heart mouldering, empty. Then, gradually, his agony became physical as well as mental and spiritual.

Yet, at first, it had been merely an annoyance to him; but as the hours passed, it grew and consumed him until every particle in his body felt it. To be alive then, was bitter, insupportable. Perhaps this ordeal would take his life. He held his breath. His pulse became faint; he grew dizzy and weak. That happened several times, but his life remained. He had a span of life yet to endure. But how, with what hopes, defences; for what purpose? He had nothing with which to make another effort. It was futile to make an attempt to arm himself, or to tell himself that he had done right, that the Police had no clue, that it would all be forgotten, and that in time he, too, would forget it and accustom himself to the weight of it. Those were the hollow phrases he had mumbled to give himself courage. They were empty of reason. The crime had gone beyond him and become too vast a circumstance to hold within his hands. He could smother his conscience before it had time to condemn him fully, but he could not allay the approach of justice to his crime, or control the feelings of horror which all in the Ward had for this deed; nor could he guess what determined, rigorous process the law would take against him by the hands of those appointed to direct the law. Thus, his life as a normal, free man was ended. Now he was a fugitive, with a span of life yet to endure. The law required him for his trial. There was a penalty he had to suffer; and after that there would remain nothing, neither life nor hope.

He covered his face with his hands and moaned in the darkness.

He stayed like that for a long time; then, exactly as he had done last night, he went into the kitchen to sleep. All day, Kit had avoided him. Whenever he had chanced to encounter her, he had not dared to look at her. No word had passed between them. She set meals for him, but he had no appetite for them. He was thirsty, that was all. His throat and mouth were parched, so he only took the tea she had made for him.

The rest, all set attractively, he left untouched. She cleared it away, and when the time came for the next meal, she set out fresh food with the same care, as if she were trying to coax him to eat. But the sight of food sickened him. He wanted only to quench his enormous thirst.

For a while, he was restless and unable to sleep. An hour passed, and finally, worn out by the oppressions of the day, he fell into deep slumber and did not wake until early morning. The night had passed dreamlessly for him, yet he had the impression of a presence near him during sleep. Suddenly, he knew who had visited him. On going to sleep he had covered himself with a rug and an overcoat, but during the night Kit had come with blankets and an eiderdown and spread them over him.

He was touched. But that tender attention only seemed to make more acute the whole question of his future with Kit. What was to happen between them? How would the two of them adjust their lives to this storm?

He was thankful that the day was a Sunday. He could rest. He could talk with Kit and decide what to do. Still, when he heard her coming downstairs, he could not bring himself to meet her. He hurried into the saloon, shaved and washed and waited there until he heard her go upstairs again. He returned to the kitchen then and drank tea, ate a slice of toast. After that, feeling the need of exercise, he put on his overcoat and left the place.

All the garbage of Saturday night littered the road, and on the air there was still the heavy smell of burnt wood, oil, smoke, rising from the ruined area by the docks. In the sunlight, men and youths lounged in little groups against walls at street corners. Across the mild activity of the autumn air, the sound of church bells pealing the Sabbath reached him. He nodded to the men and passed on, envying them their peace and fellowship from which he was forever an outcast. He walked southwards to the sea, unconsciously retracing his steps over the way he had come two nights previously.

There, the wind blew in a romping breeze. Waves tumbled quickly shorewards from a dancing sea. Everywhere, there was motion and activity and sound. Life throbbed gaily under the sunlight, and the air which he breathed was sharp with the smell of the sea which lifted in thousands of flashing slopes and crests for as far as the eye could see.

He remembered the occasions when, on countless summer evenings and week-ends, he had come here and plunged into

the sea to swim. How happy, viewed from this distance, his life had been then, how free and spacious compared to its present terrible restriction!

He turned and hurried away from the scene. Everywhere, he was reminded of his plight, his perilous, unenviable situation. His walk became an agony to him, and he sped homewards to escape the misery of his thoughts, not looking to right or left, trying not to think, only desiring to reach home and hide himself, bury his thoughts in sleep, shut himself in a room away from the light and the breeze and all the things that afflicted him.

II

It was true that at this time he did consider the effect of his crime on Kit's life; but his egotism had never granted him the ability to appreciate another's outlook when it obtruded so closely on his own. Consequently, he could not pierce her silence or realise from her behaviour the direction of her thoughts. Nor could he bring himself to open the subject with her, or even look at her; nevertheless, he waited hopefully for an opportunity to do this, praying meanwhile that she would take the initiative.

It was part of their tragedy that she too waited, not so much for him to speak to her on that dread topic as for his bold impulsive character to strike forward towards release from this predicament. As in all their affairs, she relied on him to take the first steps, and although she did not fully appreciate that this was her attitude, nevertheless she was waiting for him to act. Unconsciously, she was preparing herself to attempt a concealment of her knowledge of his crime. She was ready to create a new way of life with him which would shield him from the law, if he would but show her the way in this.

But he seemed rooted by his sense of guilt and was totally unable to take even one step, let alone safeguard herself and Lettie. He was silent, furtive. He looked abject. It was painful for her to observe his degrading acknowledgment of his crime, to watch him sink into meditation and notice how his eyes lost their lustre and became dim, fixed upon an inward contemplation of his deed and all its results.

Seeing him thus, suspended by his inability to escape the crisis, she sounded herself to discover a course. It was difficult. She had lost something of her former independence, and now, in this emergency, she was uncertain, unready. She knew she ought not to remain passive, so she tried to find a

way for him. She recognised the necessity for caution, for hope and loyalty to him, but it made no difference. The problem was plain to her, but she had no solution to suggest.

She became afraid then. What was before them? Her whole being started in horror at the prospect. It was unbelievable, it was impossible that this mighty and towering circumstance should be theirs, for them to solve, for them to traverse.

She dared not speak to him of this. She feared to hear his lips utter one word of confession or admit one fact. She waited, still vaguely trusting him or some fortunate streak of his fate to rescue them from this trouble. She could think of nothing else, could not go about her work, or find any peace, until this problem was removed.

Her life had collapsed. She was afraid of herself, afraid of the emptiness of her hands which seemed to have found all their tasks rendered trivial by this profound circumstance, afraid of the grim necessity for superhuman prudence. Looking about her, she saw nothing but these menacing factors which were beyond her experience to handle. Then a kind of despair caught her, melting her little courage into a sense of doom which embraced every horizon of her life and stretched away, remorselessly, into a future infinite as the heavens.

And this went on until late on the following Monday night when, without warning, the affair took a new turn which forced Kobling from his own sullen inactivity.

At that hour—it was shortly after nine o'clock—the Police called and questioned him. He was sitting in the saloon when they knocked. Kit was in the room behind, but she heard the officers come in; then she stood up and listened, breathless with anxiety. The Inspector spoke.

“Since you happened to be a neighbour of his, Mr. Kobling, we thought you might be able to help us. We’re anxious to find out if anyone saw Pilleger during that evening.”

“I’d have told you. I’d have come forward if I’d had any information . . .” Kobling began.

“You didn’t see him at all that evening?”

“No. Soon as I closed my place that night, I went off to look at the fire.”

“Can you remember seeing anybody—anybody of a suspicious appearance—about his place?”

Kobling laughed briefly. “Why, the road was full of people at that time!”

“What time?”

"About eight."

There was a pause. "I know that," the Inspector went on. "I wondered if, as you went past his shop, you happened to see anything in the least unusual."

"I didn't pass his place. I went down the other way."

"Can you remember which turning you took to get to the bridge?"

"What bridge?"

"I mean the docks."

"Brook Street."

"You're certain about that?"

Again there was a pause. Listening, Kit clenched her hands in sudden apprehension. Next instant, she breathed with relief, became animated by hope for the first time since last Friday. She could not prevent a smile of admiration when she heard Wal's reply.

"What's all this?" he exclaimed loudly and aggressively. "This is a cross-examination! Where did I go? What turning? What bridge? What time? Did I see anybody?" He broke off and snorted derisively, continuing: "Why don't you look for the murderer? Pilleger was strangled. Why don't you do something about it, instead of asking me which turning I took? Andy Pilleger was murdered on Thursday evening, and this is Monday evening. And you ask me a lot of questions about turnings, and what time, and . . . and . . ."

"Who told you he was strangled?"

The question was deadly, incisive.

"Everybody knows he was," Kobling said quietly.

"Nobody knows. Except the man or woman who saw him last."

"The papers. . . . Papers said it," Kobling declared.

"Did the newspapers say he was strangled at eight o'clock on Thursday evening? Eight o'clock on Thursday evening. Because if they did, I'd be pleased if you'd show me them."

"Read it somewhere. I read it," Kobling insisted, lamely.

He had betrayed himself, blundered foolishly into the trap because the Inspector had baited his impulsive character and given it a spur. Kit sensed it. Kobling knew it. The officer did, too. The pause lengthened into a significant silence. Something had to be done, and quickly, before the next snare, the next remark. Kit waited no longer. Wal had given her some sort of lead. He was there, on the other side of the door, waiting for her assistance. She knocked and entered.

Two constables were with the Inspector. She took in the

whole scene at a glance: the Inspector's momentary triumph; Wal's peril and discomfiture.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, as if taken by surprise at their presence. "What is it?"

The Inspector smiled in a friendly way. They were making enquiries. They wanted to know. . . . They were anxious to find out. . . . It was a shocking business, this murder, in this Ward, at this time, so soon after a robbery and that terrible fire. Perhaps . . . had she seen anyone? Any stranger?

She was on the defensive. She knew what had happened, and understood how Wal had betrayed himself, and where that betrayal would lead him unless she could in some way reduce it. But how, when she dared do no more than answer the very questions which were laid like tiny snares to confirm the betrayal? Only by appearing untroubled by the visit. Or by presenting an air of truth, and making plain that never for one instant did she suspect that the visit had anything to do with a possible suspicion that Kobling had murdered Pilleger.

But all along she knew that the first move had been successful against Wal, and that with patience and cunning and much determination, the others would follow. She and Wal were no match for the detectives. The latter asked their questions, offered their thanks and departed as if pleased at something they had learned. No doubt, they saw the same future which Kit did, but for her it loomed full of imminent, terrifying possibilities. She waited until the officers were away, then in utter, speechless defeat, she looked at Wal. At once, all thought of herself and the facts which terrified her were checked as she stared at him.

He was like a gambler who had staked everything and lost. He was abject, a figure of dejection almost unrecognisable in this condition. His appearance was tragic, final, as if he realised that he had played all his strokes and had nothing left. She stared at him, not speaking.

And gradually, she knew that for her he had no concern, that his own tragedy absorbed him, that her own situation simply did not reach him and engage his consideration. He wanted her sympathy for his larger trouble. She was a source of possible assistance, nothing more.

But she was unable to express or afford that sympathy, although it was truly there in her heart. She dared not approach him. The tragedy was primarily his. He made that plain, now that he needed sympathy. It was his. It separated

him from her, although he imagined that it would bring her closer to him.

She held back. She detected how, all along, he had assumed that what involved him involved her to the same degree. Until this moment, when, desperately needing her aid, he believed that his tragedy was so much greater than any which had followed for her that she must forget herself and give to him what he required. But no, she had an individual fate, a life which was her own to decide for herself! It did not belong to him to gamble. She would give it to him, if he asked it of her; she would share it. But she would not admit his right to endanger it any longer, to squander it, to unite it without question to his own.

Faintly, there stirred in her a sense of this increasing separateness, individuality. She felt that she had submitted thus far, but that now when nothing but his failure had resulted, she was free, had still a life to live.

He withdrew his gaze from hers and sat down. It was as if he had read her thoughts and noticed a mysterious momentary flash of relief pass over her expression as he relinquished his attempts to supplicate her sympathy. He was troubled. The look which he had seen, appeared to him to express the presence of something in her which he had never reached, which not even his love for her had ever commanded. It was her life, the force which made her a living being, single in the ultimate state, apart from him. It spoke in that expression and denied his appeal in this crisis.

Looking at him still, she felt an urge to speak to him, hold him in her arms. Her love for him moved her. The love which had bade her consent to marry him and live with him in this squalid locality. But she checked herself. An end had been reached, not of their love, but of a mode of life which had proved of no avail against the impulsive wilfulness of his temperament. They must make a new attempt, not rashly, but slowly, patiently, planning it carefully.

She knew that she would have to discover him, learn to understand and control his character. That curious character which made her almost a stranger to him. And all this would take time, and perhaps would never be fully realised.

She left him in the saloon and returned to the room behind. It was only then that she knew she had averted his arrest. She had gone into the saloon only just in time, and without her timely presence he would have blundered quickly into further traps. Meanwhile, he had a respite. Perhaps he

might still elude arrest. Perhaps no conclusive evidence would shape itself about him.

She saw this last possibility not as the one fortunate event for which they both longed, but rather as something which would necessitate the entire amendment of their lives. They would have to begin again, avoiding mistakes. She would have to understand his incalculable character. How difficult that would be! How long it would take! So much of her dreams, hopes, and her very body and soul, had gone to formulate their life so far, that she wept at the thought of the ruin of that promising effort, and the long and perhaps fruitless endeavour which was ahead of her.

III

For the rest of the day, and for the two succeeding days, he did not stir from the place. He was afraid to go out. Here, surrounded by the objects of his trade, and by all the familiar features of his home, he felt protected. Outside, with the streets stretching widely from him, and the sky opening with light and space above him, he felt exposed.

But soon, this irked him. The silence, the lack of exercise, the pressure of his secret upon him, gradually made even the shelter of home difficult to sustain. Yet, when he ventured to the door of the saloon and opened it to stand and take the air, he felt as if he were standing on a pinnacle for all men to see. The light and space dazed him, stripped him of a sense of protection and seemed to him to reveal what his thoughts held. He moved back into the doorway, into the confinement of the saloon and the little rooms behind it.

There, Kit lived as he did, silent and dismayed, unable to venture any conversation. Nevertheless, despite their silence, it seemed to both of them that this secret which they bore, and the fear and dread which they suffered, passed between them like the terms of a communication.

They never encountered each other without realising it. Two or three times, meeting her thus, and both of them halting irresolutely, an identical thought struck them with such clarity that they stared sadly at each other, and rushed all at once into an embrace, remaining folded like that for a long time without speaking.

It was poignant for them to hear their sobs, to see the tears, to stare in silence, helplessly, at each other. Not even their love could assist them at this time, and that, too, was a bitter

disappointment. Thereafter, they avoided each other more strictly than before, being unwilling to torture each other with the realisation of it.

Then Kobling began to believe that if he could but reach some of the places where he had previously spent his leisure, he would shed his feeling of exposure which afflicted him whenever he set foot out of doors. So, he determined to visit a billiard-saloon some distance along Kepnor Road, or the Punter Athletic Club.

He delayed a little while until his home was no longer bearable. It did not afford him a shelter where he might shed his terrors or slough off all his horrid recollections of the crime. The walls seemed to give forth a palpable echo of all his most secret communions with himself. The very objects of furniture seemed imprinted with memory of his deed, or with accounts of his endless meditations. Wherever his glance strayed, memory was stirred by these objects which had shared every moment of his misery and fright. He longed for forgetfulness. He hankered for company, exercise, a semblance of freedom, happiness, his former buoyancy. He believed there might be hope for him if he could only attain the shadow of those things.

So, three days after the visit of the Police, he dressed himself and left home, making towards the Athletic Club. The night was cold, with a thick frost already covering roofs and roadways. He walked slowly at first, almost like an invalid taking a few, wary steps. He felt very cold, then he hesitated in himself as his feet took him further from home. His senses began to recoil timidly upon themselves, making him gasp as if he were a swimmer who had ventured far from shore and become caught in a swift current. It was hard for him to cross roads, or greet people he knew, or pass groups of men near public houses. His nerves tightened; he braced himself, tried to force his trembling body into jaunty attitudes. But as he went on, he imagined that his body had failed him, and the belief that all his nervousness was inscribed upon him put him in a panic. Halting suddenly in a dark side-street, he leaned back against a wall and looked round, trembling, wavering between an urge to return and another impulse to hurry on.

He felt unprotected, undefended, swallowed by danger, convinced that he had come too far from shelter. He pressed himself against the wall, panting. His body felt suddenly hot. He loosened his overcoat and muffler. Then, wildly, he turned and started to run home.

He ran until his breath was gone and his strength used up by this spurt. He stood quite still, near a lamp-post, his coat tails flying loose, his legs sprawled as he had checked his flight. His panic had melted from his heart. His body had shed its heat; now he was cold, and the perspiration which had poured from him to his garments, touched his skin in clammy patches. He trembled as he stood on the kerb.

A mongrel dog from one of the nearby slums came nosing its way along the gutter towards him, and halting at his feet began to sniff at his shoes. He lunged lightly at it. The animal drew back, snarling, got on its belly and made a sudden rush at him. Again he lunged. The dog barked furiously, the sound making an immense rattle in the silence of the place. It spread all round, rising on the still air, like a summons calling men to this place, rousing them to come, to come quickly, for here was the man they sought.

Kobling got back in an embrasure of the wall and kept quite still, trying to soothe the dog by silence. When that failed, he stooped and beckoned it, calling softly, coaxing it.

"Old boy . . . come on then! Boy, boy!"

Nothing would quieten it. He straightened himself, cursed in rage and terror. Far down the street a door opened and someone came out on the pavement to watch. Nearer, a window was raised noisily. The dog barked more fiercely than ever, and at that, Kobling made a rush at it, shouting in fury, giving it a kick which sent it rolling and screaming to the gutter. He was off up the street before the animal set out in pursuit.

The commotion was monstrous. The dog's snarl, Kobling's thudding feet, an occasional scream from a solitary prostitute walking thereabouts, brought people from their dingy homes in that slum. Some men, thinking that another murder had been committed, set out in pursuit armed with sticks, following the dog. Kobling heard them coming. He struck off down another side street, and with the dog still at his heels, rushed at great speed to the far end. There, halting in the gloom, he made another charge at the mongrel, caught it this time with greater force in the throat and sent it screaming away from him. Quietly then, despite the chase which was drawing close on him, he hurried through a lane and out into a thoroughfare not two hundred yards from the Athletic Club. He was safe.

A few minutes later, he pushed open the door and entered the Club, removed his coat and hat and passed into the gym-

nasium to his locker. He breathed deeply, faintly sighing.

Almost the first person he encountered was Jim Smith. They had not met for several months. At the best of times there was not much friendship between them, for by nature they were out of harmony with each other, yet they both contrived to give the impression of friendliness which is supposed to rest between those related by marriage.

But under the surface they mistrusted each other, were potential enemies. The boxer despised the suave, assured manner of the other. He saw Kobling as a man of character whose natural wit and intelligence were superior to his own. He would have accepted that fact without rancour had it not been for the everlasting superior air which Kobling used towards him: an attitude which implied that all Smith's victories in the ring were coarse, brutal triumphs of mere physical strength. The boxer read that much; and deep in his sluggish emotions there was a vein of hatred for the barber. It was hardly likely to come to the surface, since they met so seldom, and when they did, Kobling was always careful to appear friendly; still it was there.

In the barber's character there were many peculiar forces always in motion. Sometimes, they were at variance with one another, but sometimes they united, then in personality and intellect he was head and shoulders above the men around him. They appreciated it. They were impressed by his swift mind which flashed its way through conversations, arguments, and carried him towards conclusions which they reached only after difficult pondering. They admired him, clustered about him to listen. Until Jim appeared.

The boxer's arrival put Kobling in the background. His renown drew men away from Kobling and brought them swarming about himself. Standing alone, Kobling felt all his contempt for Jim rise like something poisonous, bitter, in his stomach. He hated him because it seemed to him that the secret of his success was not so much that he was a clever fighter, but a hard-hitting dolt favoured by fortune. That was it! That was the real secret! Like the fools who clustered about him, the invisible figure of Fortune hung on his shoulder too, as if she were excited by his noisy triumphs! So often with him, but never upon Kobling's side.

His malice for Jim extended over all his impressions of him, all his few contacts with him. Like most malice, it was unjust, unreasonable. It flared into flame the moment Kobling set eyes on the boxer's flashy figure this night. The shame and

indignity, the fear and discomfiture which he had just endured on his way here, occurred to him as something produced by Jim's monopolising of Fortune. He stood at a distance watching the men gather round him. The latter, seeing him apart, waved a hand to him. Kobling made a little salute and smiled. It was a formality they could still achieve despite their true feelings.

But behind Kobling's smile, there was uncontrollable hatred burning his reason and intoxicating him. He strolled slowly across. He was smiling; one hand was in his pocket. His smile broadened. "Why, Jim . . ." he exclaimed. And the men, seeing him come so deliberately to greet the boxer, made way for him.

But the other knew what was in that smile. He detected it. He was accustomed to the frank fury in the crouch of an opponent, and knew how to front such outbursts. But this hatred masked by a smile and those friendly words, puzzled him. His experience could not match it, or handle it. He merely grinned sheepishly.

Kobling was beside him next moment, standing with the men, shaking his hand, holding him, thumping him, hitting him hard.

"Why, Jim! You old rabbit! Where've you been hiding? Haven't seen you for months!" And suddenly getting in a punch that caught him unawares, he sent him stumbling and flopping in an ungainly scramble to the floor. Assisted by Kobling, he was on his feet again in an instant, dusting his coat, smiling, making a gesture to silence Kobling's brief apology, smiling against Kobling's look of feigned concern. He made light of it, and resumed conversation with the men. Kobling broke in. "See you before you go, Jim." Then he crossed to his locker.

He had vented his mean spite, soothed his hatred, but now he regretted it, despised himself. The heat of his anger had left him, and looking at what was left in his heart, he saw how shabby it was, how much it was informed by jealousy, greed, pride. His evening was soured by his own foolishness.

He crossed to the bars and swung himself there. His body warmed to this exercise. His blood coursed joyously, freely. His muscles were loosened as he worked them. But his spirit was heavy, gloomy. He had spoiled his own enjoyment. He came away from the bars and the ropes and slowly dressed himself. Without a word to anyone, he sauntered off.

Jim was waiting for him in the doorway. He came over

to him. "I'm goin' your way," he said. Kobling had not imagined Jim would wait thus for him. He was surprised, faintly apprehensive.

"Good," he said, laconically.

They walked a few paces in silence. "Nice night," Kobling said.

The boxer was struggling with his words. "Me and you . . . has . . . Me and you have got a fight on," he began. Then he found himself. "I never prop'ly saw it until to-night. Now I know, though. You started it. You've always been tryin' to force it up. You took a fit, jus' now. Took a bloody fit over something, and got in a dirty knock. All right. All the same to me. You know I could knock you cold in twenty seconds if I was in the ring with you. But you want the fight in your way. All right. Like that. You want to fight that way, so I'll take you on. You want to fight like two sly bitches. All right. I see the game. But the next blow is going to be mine. So look out."

He turned off abruptly and crossed the road to the car park where his car stood. Kobling passed on without a word.

"He can't touch me," he told himself, but he was worried. On top of all his problems, he had piled another. He had made an enemy at this time when he desperately needed friends. It was the sort of thing stupid, hysterical people did. He longed to amend that mistake.

He halted on the kerb, wondering whether he should return and apologise to Jim. His pride bridled at once into refusal, and Jim's car swept by him at that instant, glittering, vulgar. He spat. A policeman on night patrol passed him. He began to walk on then. At once a tall figure in the clothes of a labourer threw away a cigarette butt, stretched, spat, and coming from the place where he had loitered, followed Kobling. When the latter entered a side street, the man began to whistle a tune. A policeman who appeared to have been awakened from a reverie by the sound, came out from the darkness of a shop doorway, and drew his cape round him before resuming his beat. Kobling saw him, and ventured to turn to glance at him. The constable's hand was raised. Somewhere down the road a plain-clothes officer awaited that signal. Kobling knew it. He was being shadowed.

His first impulse was to continue his way homewards. On second consideration, he decided to make a detour. It was nearly half-past ten. Settling into a long, powerful stride, he determined to give his escort a walk.

It was past midnight when he let himself into his saloon and closed the door after him. He was tired. It must be nearly one o'clock, he thought. He had tramped ten miles since leaving the Club. During the whole of that excursion, he had never once been lost sight of by the men appointed to shadow him. He knew it.

IV

It was a relief to Kit when she heard him leave the place. Ever since the moment when she had gone into the saloon and seen the Inspector there, she had felt that a fundamental change had come upon their positions. She had taken the initiative, and he had consented. Ever since, she had been frightened. He had relinquished something: his control of their affairs; his belief in himself. He looked to her to resolve this crisis in their life. But she repudiated the burden. It imposed on her a responsibility which she could not accept. She did her best to make this plain to him. She refused the burden, not from cowardice, but solely because she knew she had not the experience to guide even herself through this affair, let alone lead him too.

She avoided him so that he should appreciate this and make an effort to recover himself. It was his problem; he must extricate himself. Still, he seemed to trust her, rely on her, after that moment when she had rescued him.

Thus, his mere presence near her constituted a heavy obligation for her. She hid herself from him, waiting in her room. She braced her body against the door in case he attempted to force his way in. Holding her breath while he walked slowly across the little landing, she heard him call softly to her. All his burdened conscience was eloquent in his voice. It was poignant. She felt compassion for him, and was about to rush out to him. Perhaps they would be able to begin some sort of new life from that instant? They would sit down and discuss their plight and make plans.

She knew it would be useless. They dared not attempt it. They were too deeply engulfed. Any discussion would only show them the utter hopelessness of their circumstances and lead them back, after a long and exhausting route, to the point from which they had started, and from which they would never be able to progress. Nothing could remedy their fate which was caught in this disaster. Not even their love for each other could help. Love, wisdom, courage, all might be applied, but all would be impotent to assist them.

So she remained motionless behind the door and made no answer. That stupefied her. She wept bitterly at the realisation of her denial of their love, and could not help recalling how, in the past, the sound of his step, or the faint click of the scissors he used at work, had roused her desire for him. She asked herself what would become of them now that their love was incapable of defending them.

For, looking back, it seemed to her that only their passion for each other had saved them from failure, from all the vicissitudes which afflict people. Now it was no longer potent; it had failed them. She wondered why.

His love for her had not come from any profound spring in his soul, or compelled him to bridle his individuality in any way. She understood that now, and was hurt by it. To her, marriage had always implied a sharing, a unity; and for years she had imagined she understood him because he seemed to share his entire being with her. Nothing of him, she felt, could be unfamiliar to her. She saw, now, that she had deceived herself. This crime, this awful murder. . . . She could never have shared the motive for that with him, did not know what journeys, what daring solitary excursions his spirit must have taken without her. It made him a stranger to her; and as a stranger she saw him at this time in a mystery which she feared to penetrate, and which as long as she was near him would perplex her.

Gradually, an intention took shape in her mind. It was less a resolve to fly than a determination to preserve their love. She knew that in some obscure way, she was not blameless in his crime. She had not properly fulfilled her vows to him, but had always hankered for something beyond him, away from him; something free, ambitious, too precious to share with him. But the better part of their life was in this little home, had been nurtured here, as their child had been; and she wanted to retain the unspoiled memory and actuality of it as something from which a possible resurrection might be achieved. In order to do this, she was convinced she must leave him, taking the treasure of memory before it was imperilled. Alone, Wal would make his own plans. And alone she too might discover a course.

Therefore, as soon as she heard him leave, she began to prepare for flight. For the past two days, she had anticipated this moment. Her clothes, and those of Lettie, were sorted, some of them already packed. She had decided what she would take with her. Her few valuables and cherished pos-

sessions were set aside, most of them wrapped and hidden in suit-cases. She had already packed a trunk with things. Now, running upstairs, she drew the trunk from a corner, and lifting the lid, quickly put in the last garments. Working rapidly, she soon had packed all she needed. An hour passed in this way. She wondered if Wal would return and find her like this. She trembled and sat down weakly on the bed, her heart beating in flagging strokes as if it too were hurt and unable to lift itself beyond the same unhappy visions which troubled her. Then suddenly she got up. She hurried from the place to a garage a short distance down the Road. There she ordered a taxi to call for her at once.

"Where for, Mrs. Kobling?" the assistant asked her.

"Across town. Fourteen, Langley Crescent, West."

She returned to the saloon. Hurrying through, she brought the suit-cases to the door. The taxi was there. She beckoned to the driver, and the two of them brought the trunk from upstairs. While he was carrying it out, she put a cloak about Lettie.

"We're going over to see Auntie Dora," she whispered. "You'll like that, won't you? Now you wait here while I lock the doors and get the keys."

She went quickly about the place, locking the doors and windows. During the last few days, she had done this so often in imagination, that it required very little effort of thought to go through all these little details with speed at this time. Her last action was to leave a letter for Wal. She had written it earlier. It was brief. She read it again before enclosing it and sealing the envelope.

"DEAREST WAL,

"I am going with Lettie to Dora and Jim. You will know why I am doing this. It is the best thing, I think. I don't know what else to do to help things at this awful time, but I know neither of us could have stood it together any longer. There is a chance that all will come out for us as we want it to. I shall wait and long for that time, and never forget you meanwhile.

"Your own

"KIT."

She left the letter where he would find it, and hurried out to the taxi. When it began to move, she leaned back and sighed. The suspense of the last few days was over and she could begin to look ahead.

It seemed to her that the future was clearer already, nevertheless it still terrified her. She knew that beyond all the possibilities which she had already fearfully foreseen, there were others equally terrible. She dared not ponder them. They were far ahead. She must look at the immediate future.

She decided that she must first of all confide in Dora and Jim. She would tell them why she had left Wal, and explain that had there been the faintest chance of her being able to influence him at this time, she would have stayed. She would say that realising how hopeless it was, she had left him so as not to hinder his own chances. Alone, with only himself to consider, he would find some means of escape or settlement. He would be free to think only of himself. She trusted him to do that. Then at a future date, when he had emerged from this trouble, or perhaps expiated his crime, she would return to him. Meanwhile she would look for work.

That was quite clear to her, but as the taxi sped across the city, she knew that all would not be as easy as she had imagined. There were all sorts of factors which she had not admitted to consideration. She had supposed that by leaving him and accepting her own responsibilities, she was no longer at the mercy of all the chances and changes which his incalculable temperament created. It was only now, when she had taken the step and left him, that she discovered how closely she was bound to him.

For days she had imagined this hour. She knew, now, that her vision had been faulty. It had resulted quite differently from the way she had expected it would; and she discovered that although she might be apart from him, there was still an imperishable, mysterious bond remaining between them which still dictated their fate.

She could not elude it. All that happened to him would still affect her almost to the same degree. He could still endanger her by his reckless gambling. What he experienced could still be felt by her in some measure. Time and space might separate them physically, but something else endured, would always endure, and hold them united, no matter what happened to either of them.

They were united. She appreciated that. She saw how, all along, she had condoned his behaviour, encouraged it by her passive attitude. First his theft, then this other and more serious crime. One leading to the other until this climax had been reached. She accused herself. She was to blame. If he had been weak, impulsive, wicked, it was only because her

character had permitted him to be, or had shown him that she was ready to encourage his gambles. The idea increased in her mind, and for an instant she was on the point of returning to him, convinced that she must suffer whatever consequences befell him, just as she had mutely condoned the acts that had admitted those consequences. But the taxi was already stopping at Jim's house.

She got out and rang the bell. Up to this moment, the whole circumstance which had resulted in her coming here had been between Wal and herself, something known only to the two of them. Now, when she was on the verge of disclosing it, its tragic nature occurred more fully to her for the first time. When the maid opened the door and brought her in, she was pale and silent, and a moment later when Dora appeared, she could do nothing but stand there and clutch her sister's arm.

"Whatever is the matter?" Dora exclaimed.

Kit waited until the maid had gone before she explained.

"I had to come away," she began. Her eyes overflowed with tears. She sat down, and suddenly flinging herself along the settee and burying her face against the cushion, remained like that for some minutes before lifting herself and relating the whole story.

The maid had taken Lettie upstairs to bed. Dora remained with Kit, listening.

"I knew he was the one . . ." Kit concluded. "When I looked at him, I knew at once. . . ."

Dora stood quite still. "My God, oh, my God!" she whispered. She put her hand on Kit's, and the two of them stayed like that in silence for several minutes, like two people swallowed in sorrow, unable to think.

Ten minutes later, Jim returned. Dora took him aside at once. "Don't say anything to her. I'll tell you why she's come, later on. Lettie is upstairs. They've left Wal."

"Wha' for?" he blurted.

Dora said nothing. She frowned and shook her head and returned to Kit. Jim followed her.

"Glad to see you, Kit," he said. She sat up and looked at him. "Tell him, Dora. You tell him," she said.

"Not now. You'd better get some sleep. What you want is rest," Dora insisted, leading her away.

When Dora returned to the drawing-room, Jim was still sitting on the music-stool with his hands clasped between his legs. He looked up. His peculiar features, with the nose

falling perpendicularly and ending in two spreading nostrils, seldom showed much expression. Now, however, he seemed puzzled and angry. His brow was wrinkled, and his heavy lips opened loosely.

"What's wrong? I just seen Wal at the Club. Something's wrong with him," he began.

"Listen. She left him because she couldn't stand it any more. Couldn't . . ." she stammered. She sat down slowly. In a whisper, she added: "He killed Pilleger."

She glanced at him. The only change on his expression was in his lips. They closed; then his face looked more than ever like a great piece of marble, carved in a few rough strokes.

Neither of them spoke. They could not think of anything to say which would adequately convey their feelings. Each knew, too, exactly what the other was thinking. Their silence expressed it.

v

When Kobling let himself into the saloon, he closed the door after him and locked it. Very carefully, he drew the blind across and peeped out. Two constables were standing in the darkness on the opposite side of the Road. The sight of them roused a fresh outburst of anger in him. He resented the way he was being followed, spied upon. His pride was hurt. He felt as if he were already under arrest, under close restraint. If they had definite evidence against him why didn't they proceed, make a charge in Court, get the whole business over quickly? Why were they behaving in this cat and mouse fashion?

He knew it was useless to be angry about it, yet he could not prevent his feelings from rankling. He sat down in one of the chairs in the saloon. They were applying torture to him. They were following him, putting a close guard about him, making clear to him the fact that he was a murderer.

He started out of his chair. He was gasping. He had never before seen his crime from that viewpoint. He had always regarded it from his position as an enemy, an antagonist.

Pilleger had challenged him, fought him, and lost. That was what he believed. Pilleger and himself. A duel. Let the men talk! Let the women cower in fright at nights! Whose business was it that Pilleger was dead? Had anybody cared, had men and women been concerned when Pilleger had tried to intimidate him and ruin his life? No! Then let the fools

hold their tongues now! That was what he had thought.

But now that the Police were taking determined action, he saw his crime in a wider, more significant light. They intended to make a case against him, to arrest him when the evidence was conclusive, and bring him to trial because he had murdered Pilleger. Nothing mattered to them except that a life had been taken. And he was the man who had taken that life. He had violated the law, and the officers of the law were proceeding against him. His deed had passed from something personal to a wider category. It was a matter for society and the laws which society had fashioned as a defence against elements such as himself. He would be judged, and if he had any plea he would have to make it to mankind, a jury. And at the thought of all this, something like a flood entered his mind, breaking down and carrying away the inadequate excuse which he had raised against his conscience. A new issue was admitted, and already it seemed to him that it was too late to avoid it. He was apprehensive. He left the saloon and entered the room behind, closing the door and sitting down in the darkness before the dying fire.

He tried to remember what had happened in Pilleger's room. Staring at the red heart of the fire, he recalled the scene; and his exhausted mind, taking it avidly, made monstrous fantasies of it as he fell into heavy slumber. He woke frequently, stirred, and tried to discover in the lurid mass of his dreams some drift of reason from which he might learn whether he was awake or dreaming, a murderer or an innocent man. But all was confusion, and almost immediately he fell asleep once more, waking finally in the cold of early morning, when he rose and crossed to the settee to finish his sleep there.

Thus, it was not until morning that he discovered Kit's letter. He saw it there as a witness of his guilt and his nightmares; a presence with a message for him, mute in the darkness, patiently waiting the moment when he would take it.

He lifted it from the table, and seeing Kit's writing on the envelope, he knew what the letter would tell him. Nevertheless, he was afraid to open it, did not want to discover the full extent of his loss. He stood looking at the envelope, thinking about Kit and his child, until suddenly in panic at the thought that she had gone perhaps to Jim's home, he ripped open the envelope and read the letter. He read the first sentence again and again.

"I am going with Lettie to Dora and Jim."

Her flight was a possibility he had never calculated. Had it

occurred to him, he would have dismissed it from his mind as an absurdity; so that now, when it had happened, its complete element of surprise stunned him.

He had not foreseen Kit's attitude properly, had never for one instant supposed that she would find his problem too vast for her. He could not appeal to her, or discover all that had urged her to leave. He had to accept the fact, adjust himself to it. But in his heart there was neither the ability nor the desire to do this. He had trusted her all along, and could not conceive at this time why she had deserted him. Reading her letter, he found it hard to understand. Her explanation seemed fantastic to him.

But there was another and more appalling aspect of her departure, and of this he thought deeply and with alarm. Unwittingly, she had placed him in Jim's hands. That was the truly terrible part of her flight. She had gone with her secret to Dora and Jim. And just as he had been in Pillegger's power in the matter of the theft, he was now absolutely in Jim's hands regarding the murder.

He put down the letter. Ever since the night of the fire, he had believed that by keeping an inner guard on himself, he would ensure his safety. Yet, despite all his caution, and the efforts he had made to mask his fear, his secret had escaped him. It was almost ironical. The one eventuality he had never given one second of thought to, had occurred, and he was left ringed about by a mass of consequences quite without his power to control. His whole fate had swept out of his own keeping and gone for shelter to Jim!

He swore and spat viciously into the dead fire; and for the first time, he saw how his life had always been spoiled by his envy and jealousy of the boxer. He had tried to reach the same heights of popularity, the same rich success as Jim. He saw how he had failed, and how he might have succeeded in other directions had he been wise enough to ignore the boxer's rowdy triumphs and concentrate upon his own affairs. All his life he had struggled impulsively and wildly merely to attain a colourful success. Now the end had come. He was at the mercy of Jim's generosity.

Of that virtue, he himself had little; and because he knew in what way he would have acted had the advantage been his, he did not ascribe any merciful qualities to the boxer. He felt that it was time he prepared himself for the end.

He believed that at any moment the Police would be here. He was determined to resist arrest. He still had Pillegger's

revolver. It was a formidable weapon, loaded in all its six chambers. He took it from its hiding-place and tried to dispose it about him. It bulged prominently in his pocket, and in the end he returned it to the drawer. But after that he made up his mind to keep his shop door closed from henceforth. He planned to purchase sufficient provisions to last him for some time, then he would barricade the premises. He began to rush about the place, preparing his defences, piling chairs and tables against doors in readiness for the attack, making three or four rings of defence until in the last, innermost one, he hid the revolver.

Downstairs, the clock struck the half hour. He paused then. It was half-past eight. A moment later he heard the apprentice ring. He went down, and quickly removing the chairs and benches from the door, he let him in. Almost immediately, the first customer hurried in for a shave.

Slowly, all Kobling's hasty resolves faded. The press of the ordinary round brought him to a better realisation of his position, gave him a sense of proportion. All the foolish fire and flash passed from his mind, and he accepted his defeat and was ready to admit whatever fate opened before him.

From that moment a kind of fatalism grew in him. In his heart, where before there had always been a tempest of envy, bravado, pride and ambition, there was now only a calm and a desire for rest. All his fears, all the heat and anxiety raised by those miserable presentiments which had fretted him, were hushed. He saw the world in new terms, discovered himself, and felt that everything which could threaten him had passed forever.

He believed firmly that at any moment the Police would enter the saloon with a warrant for his arrest. He was ready. He would put down the razor or scissors, remove his white jacket and put on his hat and coat. He had no intention of resisting.

The morning passed. He was hungry. He left the boy in charge and went to a nearby café for his dinner. Several times, a constable passed the door; then Kobling thought: "They're waiting for me to come out." But when he finished his meal and paid his bill and left the place, there was no sign of the officer. He waited a while on the pavement outside, before strolling back to the saloon.

"They're going to wait until evening, when it's dark. That's why they're waiting: for the dark, to avoid a crowd."

The short afternoon passed quickly to dusk. He switched

on the light in the saloon. "It's dark now. Why don't they come?" he asked himself.

The delay made him impatient. Another hour passed. He found himself actually anticipating with relief that imminent moment when the door would open. He wondered what the Police would say. He tried to imagine the effect of his arrest on the people in the Ward. The excitement, the secret satisfaction that the murderer was under arrest, the surprise.

He shut the saloon for the night. The boy went home. Kobling went into the room behind the shop and prepared a meal for himself. He sat down and ate it. Another hour passed. He heard nine o'clock strike. He felt uneasy and restless. Why didn't they come? He was ready; they had only to ring the bell, and he would admit them, listen attentively while they made the formal declaration to him, and leave straight away with them. Perhaps their preparations were not quite complete.

He got up and went into the saloon. The light from a street lamp shone into the place through a space between the blind and the side of the window. He approached the door, lifted the blind, and cautiously peered out. Across the road, two men were standing talking face to face. He unlocked the door and stepped stealthily into the doorway, closing the door behind him.

They saw him at once. He noticed how their heads turned ever so slightly in his direction. He pretended to be taking a breath of fresh air. He swayed on his heels, whistled, looked up at the night sky, and presently slipped back into the saloon.

What were they waiting for? He walked restlessly to and fro, all his senses stretched alertly. A long time passed, still without incident. What did they intend doing?

It occurred to him then that they might not be coming after all. The idea was like a little spark amidst ashes. It took light. It obsessed him, making his fancies soar into all manner of hopeful flights which ended always in uncertainty and tension. He was unable to believe that Jim had not take advantage of the chance which had fallen to him last night. His threat of revenge for the insult he had suffered. Why would he renounce a chance like that? But if he had told the Police what he knew, why were they waiting?

Perhaps, after all, he had not told them! Perhaps he never would! Perhaps he would keep silent about the affair!

The idea took light like the others. It developed. It intrigued him. The Police were not coming. They would never

come! There was no evidence to prove what he had done! They might watch him from now until years had passed, but they would learn nothing from him. Nobody knew but Kit, himself, Dora and Jim. And Jim had said nothing.

Hope began to return steadily to him. His empty heart welcomed it hungrily, and it seemed to him that in the darkness which obscured his future there was a promise of light, as yet distant and uncertain, but none the less feasible.

VI

For the next three or four days that hope sustained him like wine or wholesome food, so that in this momentary recovery he hardly noticed his solitude. After that, when the prospect of hope neither faded nor enlarged, and it became necessary for him to await patiently whatever development fate might bring, his loneliness became something which weighed on him with increasing pressure as the days passed.

At first, he stayed at home in the evenings and passed the time at tasks connected with his business. He had not opened his account books for weeks, nor examined his stock. For two or three days he was busy with these matters, yet all the while he was working, he was conscious of the deep silence around him. And out of that silence, something seemed to swell, as if unseen presences were gathering in the room, or as if all the incidents that had occurred here in years gone by, were being re-enacted by lost echoes assembling themselves. Then, no matter how he concentrated on his work, he was forced to recall those scenes. His pen stayed idly in his hand; he leaned back in his chair and dreamed.

Hours passed in this way, and he came out of those reveries and felt the hush around him like an edifice which he dared not disturb with sound or movement for fear of bringing it crashing upon him. He got up slowly, noiselessly, crept about on tiptoe, held his breath. Until, all at once, halting on his way through the room, he made an abrupt gesture, spoke aloud, broke the mist of silence which was cast over him.

But next morning when he awoke, the silence was over the place again, like a delicate web spun throughout the rooms. He was glad when it was time to open the saloon. And all day, standing there over his customers, he could forget what awaited him after the day's work: the impenetrable silence; the interminable, melancholy hours bringing their endless processions of dreams and regrets.

When eight o'clock came and he shut the saloon, he stood sometimes for half an hour before going inside to make a meal for himself. He had to bring himself to a pitch of decision before he could enter the room where the threads of so many painful memories awaited him where he had left them last night, the night before, and the night before that. At last, with furtive steps he entered the room. His breathing was faint, his ears alert, on guard against those flocks of dead thoughts. But they came all the same, insidiously, then in a flood of remorse, fear, anxiety from which there was no escape.

He reviewed his life so far, admitted his faults, was ready to expiate his crime. He must go to the Police and confess. But next day, when he stood in the saloon, he despised himself for these admissions; and from the safety of this distance he threw defiance at his maudlin self that had wept, cringed in fear, been contrite and wanted penance. There was a suggestion of bravado in his stance beside the chair on which his customers sat; but in his heart there was only loneliness, tiredness, suspense, so much of them that he was exasperated and shouted back at them only in a last attempt to expel them. He told himself that he could bear them. Let her desert him with Lettie! Let her betray him, leaving him to face this crisis alone! He would steer out of it some day, then . . . then. . . . Or let people in the city whine about the brutal murder, as yet unsolved! Let them frighten one another with fantastic stories of a fiend haunting the dark streets! Let them howl for an arrest! It all amounted to nothing. What mattered was that he had fought Pilleger and overcome him. That was an older law than the one which the Police upheld.

Thus, during the daytime, he denied his better reasoning and reaffirmed all the forces of his character which had brought him to this moment. As the day waned, however, and his weariness recurred, he sighed at his foolish spirit, and again he hesitated to enter the little room behind the saloon.

The whole building was swallowed in silence. The hush seemed to him to have invaded his body and settled about his soul. His nerves were strung tautly. If the tap in the kitchen spilled one drop of water in the basin beneath, he started at the unaccustomed sound in that place where sound was unexpected. And if the furniture, or the wood of the wainscot or stairs creaked suddenly, the long drift of his thoughts was again interrupted, as if someone had whispered to him.

Day by day the place settled into deeper quietness until it became too much for him. He fled from it. As soon as his

work was finished, he locked the place and set out along the crowded Kepnor Road, losing himself in the throngs there, taking his meals in obscure cafés near the docks or in fish and chip bars.

At first this eased his solitude, and for a few days he was happy. He entered the conversations in those places and found a rough companionship amongst the cosmopolitan crowds which flocked in those dockside streets. But it was only on the surface of his life. It did not penetrate where he wanted it to. He might laugh and talk amongst his new acquaintances, but all the time the same loneliness and longing engaged him as before.

He visited the places where he and Kit had walked long ago. Each night, he went further afield. He walked past the house where her parents lived: a little place in a long street where five hundred houses of identical shape and size faced one another in two long rows. He tramped out of the city towards the outlying country. There, in the lanes and on the commons, he saw lovers loitering as he and Kit had once done, their bodies joined in the darkness as if they had come together after a time of parting, or had some prescience of the brevity of life. He turned aside and retraced his steps quickly, his heart caught by an unaccountable compassion for these strangers.

Thereafter, he wandered nearer the West Ward, until late one night he found himself opposite Jim's house. He waited a long time in the shadow of the trees which stood there. In the autumn breeze, the branches stirred incessantly, making a tremulous rustling, like sound accompanying his quickly flowing thoughts.

He wanted to cross the road. He felt he could no longer resist his desire to see Kit and his child. The impulse made jealous, enticing visions for him. He tried to think of what he would say when he saw Kit again, and met Dora and Jim. What could he say? There was so much, such a confusion of emotions in him. How would he begin?

He was unable to think. Fear of a rebuff checked him. And presently the lights in the house went out. Something closed against his desire then, but he still waited under the trees, afraid to return to the solitude of his home.

This was the sole remaining source of happiness for him. As he stood opposite the house, he felt near to those he loved. For a while, he shared their shelter and felt his troubles lifted from him.

At home, long after midnight, encouraged by a momentary, extravagant whim, he took pen and paper and sat down to write to Kit. He intended asking her to return. The words came easily, persuasively. He filled two sheets before he stopped and read what he had written. He tried to weigh the possible effect of it on her.

But, as he read, a feeling of shame took him; and before he had reached the end of the first page, he was sickened by this attempt to entice her back. When he had written the words, they had seemed truthful, plausible. Now, going over them as she would see them, he realised how pitiable they were in their recital of his loneliness, his weakness and longing.

He was ashamed of his attempt to rouse her pity. Yet there was nothing else to tell her, no other way of appealing to her. His loneliness and hunger for her were the intolerable bonds of his life at this time, and he could think of nothing else to say.

Nevertheless, he knew that she would anticipate a confession from him of his guilt, or expect him to appear ready to expiate his crime. But he had no explanation to offer, no confession; and remorse only came to him at rare moments which he afterwards repudiated.

He crushed the letter between his hands and threw it into the grate. He and Kit were in two different worlds, separated by a gulf which was too wide to cross. Time, and the very silence which covered him, were the only facts which might help them.

VII

A letter from him, a message of some kind, a sign, a visit from him, were the things which Kit constantly lived for during that time. She was certain he would communicate with her; and for this reason she would not commit herself to any definite plan, or discuss the affair with Dora or Jim, lest whatever decision they reached might be contrary to Wal's.

What she hoped from him was an indication of his faith in a future for them. She treasured this hope more firmly as the days passed. It endured his silence. It survived those hours when she saw another end awaiting him and could not dismiss the vision of his trial and execution. It became the point from which all her thoughts travelled and to which they always returned.

But after a fortnight, her faith dwindled. Perhaps he had misjudged her and regarded her desertion of him as the end

of her love. Perhaps he had nothing more to say to her. Pondering these matters, she feared that this separation would admit all sorts of new, incalculable factors which she had not foreseen.

She had never intended it to be final. It was to be only a temporary condition whereby their love might be saved from the disaster which she had felt threatening when they had been together. It was her attempt to assist him through this circumstance. But it had produced the opposite effect, and she longed to see him or write in explanation to him.

At the same time, in spite of her longing for news from him, she was terror-struck at the thought of what his letter might contain. He might accuse her of deserting him, or tell her only of a development which would imperil their future! That would destroy her hopes. She could not think about it. She must write quickly, to avert it.

She sat for hours, staring at the blank page before her, the pen clutched in her hot fingers. Thoughts—fragmentary, sad, and confused—crowded her mind. How to express them, she did not know. How to begin. How to convey them reasonably. Dora found her like that and sat down beside her.

"What are you going to tell him?"

But Kit could not answer even that simple question, although in her heart all that she wanted to say to Wal, awaited this chance. She could only feel her love for him, her concern, her hope and longing for their future, without being able to offer one fruitful idea as to how either of them could reach that state.

"What will you say?" Dora repeated.

Jim came in as she spoke. The three of them sat in silence, as if they were awaiting something and were nervous, ill at ease, perhaps frightened.

At first, it had been Kit's problem, and Dora and Jim had felt a curious, selfish satisfaction at the thought that nothing like this had struck their lives. Gradually, however, in all kinds of unexpected ways, the affair had claimed them and become as much theirs as hers. It preoccupied them as it did her. They saw it in the same terms as she did, and began to accept responsibility. Yet, no matter how carefully they considered it, they were unable to offer any advice. For days at a time, they avoided the subject and behaved as if it were remote, or as if by refusing to discuss it, it would disappear altogether. But, eventually, a word, a glance passing between them would admit it, as a door opened ever so slightly to a

gale admits the sound and motion of the storm. It was beyond their experience to cope with. They had nothing new to say, nothing to suggest.

But alone, in their own room, Dora and Jim were often more frank about it.

"I feel I'm to blame a bit," Dora said tearfully. "You remember when she used to come over so often and we went to places together, and she ran up those accounts . . ."

"No harm in that!" he interrupted.

"Not for me, but for her."

"How?"

"Because she couldn't afford to. They hadn't the income to run to it. Can't you see? That's the trouble. We had the money to do all sorts of things. We had it, and they hadn't. We lived out here, and they lived in that hole. And it isn't as if we deserved this, any more than they deserved to suffer that little place down in Kepnor Road. They're as good as we are. That's what started the whole thing. . . ."

"Course not!"

"Yes, it did. It's what starts all the trouble all over the world, and always has."

Dimly, he saw her idea; but it was new and peculiar to him, and quite outside his own philosophy. There was a long silence between them. At last he said:

"Well, he's a queer chap." And she knew by the way in which he spoke that he understood her. After that, they were ashamed to mention this strange conclusion to each other. It seemed to them that they had lighted on the true explanation of Kobling's character and had found something pitiable, poignant, frustrated, conceited, full of conflicting weaknesses and talents. Qualities and faults which they knew they too possessed, and which consequently shamed them to mention. Something inescapable which involved all mankind and which they had foolishly allowed to come to this stage in the case of Kit's husband.

"But we couldn't have stopped it," he said.

"We're to blame, though. We're to blame a bit."

"How could we have stopped it?" he asked.

"Somehow. I feel we could, somehow. But I don't know. . . . I don't know. We must look after her now, and Lettie."

"Yes, sure," he agreed readily, as if he were trying to make amends.

Meanwhile, after much trouble, Kobling had succeeded in hiring an elderly woman to spend a day cleaning his home. He called on the woman at her own home and almost implored her to come. He had met with so many refusals that he was beginning to wonder if anyone would consent to work for him. He offered double the usual wages. She seemed to hesitate even then, her features screwed into an expression of mistrust. Finally, she consented to come next day; whereupon he returned home as if something joyous were about to happen. And looking round his home at all the dust and untidiness, he rejoiced that by to-morrow it would be cleaned.

Next morning, the woman did not appear at the appointed time. His spirits fell, and he watched the clock, waiting for her as if she were an important personage with whom he had an appointment. At last, when he had resigned himself, she appeared. He left the saloon and followed her to show her round the place. She was silent, possessed by a sense of curiosity whose satisfaction seemed to sharpen the sense and make her more nervous at the same time. He felt he knew why she stared at him, glanced fearfully about her, edged back whenever he drew near her or passed her. In the end, irritated by her silence and her furtive look, he left her and returned to his saloon.

At mid-day, she came to tell him that she had prepared a dinner for him. That was quite unexpected. She spoke for the second time when he entered the room and sat down to the meal. At once, he detected pity in her remark. He did not know what to say, for her observation did not spring from any special perception which she had made of his unhappy situation, but rather from something which he sensed was the popular impression of him in the neighbourhood. He mused as he ate, recalling what she had said. "Expect you can do with something nicely set up, after being on your own for so long."

Then, in alarm, with a return of his old feeling of danger, he saw the whole picture of himself as his neighbours had drawn it. He knew why the charwoman had been so silent, so inquisitive and so awed. All along he had imagined that his loneliness had not been suspected by others. He had told his customers that Kit and Lettie had gone away for a holiday. He knew now that he had not deceived any of them with that fiction.

They knew she had left him. To-night, when the charwoman joined her friends and neighbours, there would be more stories told of him. He felt his peril to be acute. It would not be long before the truth was guessed. The gossip would spread and make news which would widen, strike precisely towards the truth. That frightened him. He saw it as something inevitable which would occur soon now.

And after that expression of pity, the charwoman began to chatter with him, pursuing a conversation which he knew was going towards the subject of the murder. She spoke of the great fire which had raged that night. Kobling prepared himself, trying to strike a natural air. They said . . . They say . . . I think . . . If you ask me . . . There's a lady lives next door to me who says. . . . Until at last, keeping her head averted, she drew breath, was silent for some seconds, and said in a tone barely above a whisper:

"What you think of that awful affair couple of doors along here just up the Road?"

Her question, forced out of her by her inordinate lust for sensation, threw a suggestive light on the situation. She was the daring emissary of thousands of women like herself. She was here merely to spy, to horrify herself with what she gleaned, so that in turn she could horrify her friends and become a person of importance amongst them when she told her tale this evening. Telling more of him, to ears that had heard it said already that there was something queer, some funny business at Kobling's, some very funny things happening to that fellow!

"Bad bit of business," he replied.

"This lady what lives next door to me says they know who did it," she went on, remorselessly

"That so?" he said.

She was silent. He had not made the anticipated response. She seemed to await it, implacably, from him. He gave it almost immediately. "Who did it?" he asked.

That was all she wanted from him. His little flash of surprise; his quick question. And now she could fence with him, play him, like the subtle gossip she was.

"This lady says someone what owed Andy Pilleger a lot of money," she returned.

He was as quick as herself at this sort of duel. "I heard the same," he said. He got up from the table. "I know a chap in the Police," he continued. "Told me they know who did it. Told me they know the fellow. . . ."

"Why don't they get him then?" she exclaimed, furiously. "That's what I'd like to know! It's gettin' on people's nerves. It's simply chronic! Why don't they up and arrest him?"

He accepted her challenge, and faced her. "Because they can't, that's why," he said, calmly. "Before a warrant is issued for a man's arrest, there has to be sufficient evidence that that man has broken the law. The law protects all men, all women. It says a person is innocent until proved guilty. Proved, see? Proved guilty. And in this case, the Police can't prove anything. They've got no clue. They follow him about day and night, and he's never out of their sight. But they can't arrest him. Nobody saw him go to Pilleger's. Nobody heard him while he was there. And nobody saw him leave. No fingerprints, no clues."

"Everybody knows he did it! Why don't they arrest him and put him on trial and find out that way?" she demanded.

"I've told you! The law doesn't work that way. You can't arrest an innocent man, unless you got proof. . . ."

"Innocent!" she scoffed. "He done it!"

"They can't prove it," he said quietly. "Let them prove it. . . ."

"He ought to swing for it!" she declared.

He accepted that challenge too with the same cold self-possession with which he had fronted all the others.

"They've got to prove he did it, first," he said. "But they can't. They never will, either. If they spent a lifetime. . . . He's safe. He's the only one who knows what happened in Pilleger's place that night. They'll never find out, unless they bring him up on some charge or other, and it comes out."

His words tailed away into silence. He saw in her eyes all the awe and horror which she felt as she watched him and heard him. He dared not stay any longer. He went away, hardly conscious of where he was going. Upstairs, he sat on his bed and tried to understand what he had done. An issue had been joined between the old crone and himself. She represented the public, his neighbours, mankind; and he had spoken in defiant defence of himself. He knew that before this day was over, all he had said would be whispered round the city. It would travel from lip to lip, ear to ear. Words. His defence of himself. His challenge to the world. His justification. He asked himself how it would be met. What would they say? Would anyone uphold him? Would anyone come forward to witness against him? Was there a word to match his word?

He wandered aimlessly about the room and let his hands rest on the furniture, on the ornaments. He opened his wardrobe. He saw at once that his clothes had been moved. Their neat arrangement had been ever so slightly disturbed. He opened a chest of drawers. It was the same there. The piles of vests, socks, shirts, had all been unmistakably disarranged by a furtive hand. Under one of the piles, Pilleger's revolver was hidden. He wondered anxiously if the old woman had discovered it, and what she would tell her friends if she had. To-morrow, perhaps to-morrow night, there would be an answer to his observations made to her.

He tried to think what it would be, and what fresh possibilities would spread ripple-like from it. He could not discover it. His thoughts wandered off into long fancies; he yawned.

But he had his answer next day, and recognised it immediately as a sequence of what had been said between the charwoman and himself. His apprentice did not come to work, and except for half a dozen strangers who came in for attention, his customers had deserted him. Such was the answer given him.

In the evening, he stood at the door of the saloon and bought a copy of the evening newspaper.

"VERDICT IN PILLEGER INQUEST."

A verdict at the resumed Inquest. "Wilful murder against some person or persons unknown." Nothing more than that.

He read it sitting at the table in the room behind the saloon. Now, perhaps, the whole affair would conclude, end in silence. His heart reached with momentary hope towards that end, but knew in the next instant that it would be futile to expect so much. Nevertheless, in the shallow, meagre shelter of his spirit he clung to that seed, breathing his hope into it, nursing it avidly, granting it what warmth his faith could afford it. Then it seemed to him that this calamity through which he and Kit were passing was not their authentic life, but was an irrelevant pattern which had entered its threads and would presently weave its way out of it. He told himself that it would not abide, or alter the memory of what had gone before, or prevent Kit and himself from uniting again.

From that time, he tried to sustain that belief, and for a while it actually flourished. But he knew that it had no chance to take deep root in himself. He clutched it, believing that a miracle of his fate might bring it to pass. The days made a little total. In face of the dwindling custom of his trade, he

maintained this defence around his heart. Thus a week passed. Ten days. His till had no more than a few shillings in it. Holding them, he grinned. They were the worth of his life, his spirits, his fate.

After that, he let all his hope stream away from him, and no longer kept up any normality in his affairs. He lived only for the moment, and did not dare either to look ahead or turn to his memories. During the day, in the long hours of idleness, he pored over the sporting news. His loneliness hardly ever troubled him now. He had become accustomed to it. It was the same during the evenings. He closed his saloon at dusk, dressed himself, and went out, avoiding all his old associates and consorting with the seamen, the bullies, the prostitutes and other figures in the cafés and bars deep in the heart of the dock quarter. Late at night, he made for home. He was tired, sometimes drunk. He slept heavily. Often, he awoke for an instant during the night. At such moments, his mind was tardy over its defences; and before he could prevent it, the endless lament of his conscience, which in his waking hours he held pent and sublimated, rose and troubled him. He groaned then and tried to sleep again. It was difficult. He closed his eyes and huddled into the sheets and waited. Then, mercifully, his mind clouded. He slept for a long time, often far into the day, and did not trouble to open the saloon.

Christmas approached. He could not decide what to do. Several times, he walked to Jim's house, and hiding himself under the trees opposite, stood there for hours at a time, watching and waiting and feeling himself warmed somewhat by his proximity to Kit and Lettie. But he could never bring himself to cross the road and knock on the door. Had he seen any of them come out, he would have hastened to them. But in all his long vigils he saw no sign of them. He waited until all the lights expired. The bare branches above him twitched in the breeze which always seemed to blow harder the moment the lights went out. He felt desolate then. He walked slowly from his hiding-place and returned home, his limbs stiff from their long inactivity in the cold.

On Christmas Eve he purchased several expensive toys and had them packed and sent to Lettie. He sent no letter, and none came in reply. He spent the feast much as he passed other days. He resisted all self-pity. But on the morning of Boxing Day when he awoke after a riotous night with a crowd of seamen and their women, he could not prevent his memory of former Christmas Days recurring to him. He had imagined

himself armed against such recollections. Now they rode across his thoughts like tender things, and despite all his self-control, he was overcome.

But his tears did not ease his heavy despair. After a while, he laughed at them, spat, and began to dress. He wanted to go out. But where; where to? What was there to do? He yawned as he put those questions to himself. It occurred to him then that they had a wider significance. They were not only for this moment, this day, but were for every moment, for the rest of his life.

Where was he going, and what was he to do?

He did not know. His existence was suspended in uncertainty, static, and he had stopped puzzling himself about it. His business had dwindled so that he often wondered why he opened the saloon at all. He was living on his capital, materially and spiritually. Hope, and sometimes the very desire to live, had left him. He had no faith in himself, or in Kit, or in the things which had formerly given purpose to him. He often asked himself why he lived, why he clung to these thin shadows of old activities. It was only when he noticed the Police still shadowing him that he found the answer.

He lived this wretched existence as a final justification of himself. There was nothing else for him to do. He lived it in terms of his undisciplined character, irregularly, coming and going when the whim moved him, obeying his impulses. He spent as little time as possible in the place, and preferred, when he had to be there, to sit in the saloon. There, idling, he waited more for the hours of night than for customers; but when, by good fortune, a few strangers called for service, he was glad of the chance to work. It gave a meagre purpose to his life and bound him by slender threads to the orderly routine of past years. He felt then that he was not altogether lost. There was still this faint breeze in his sails; he was still moving, still on a course despite all that had happened.

He took heart at that, and felt that presently his miserable life would open to happier prospects. Again, customers would fill the saloon and the talk would buzz heartily. In the rooms behind, Kit and Lettie would live again with him. He would hear snatches of their laughter as he worked.

But it was all nothing more than a fancy with which he amused himself. The silence and disorder of the place denied it, and showed him what were the true features of his life, told him that he was a fugitive at the last shelter.

It was true. Everything had reached this final stage. He

was always conscious of the Police around him wherever he went. His life belonged to the law now. He had made use of it, had ruined his chances with it, had nothing more to hope from it. Now his trial awaited him.

All the forces of law and authority were being directed to his arrest. All the knowledge and experience of the officers of the law were being used in the search of that plane upon which he and Pilleger had moved during those last hours when they had come face to face. He knew this. The Press reported it.

"... and the search is being narrowed. Several important facts are being considered, and the Police are confident of being able to make an early arrest."

Two eminent detectives from Scotland Yard had come down to take charge of the case. They were giving him time, letting him have all the rope he needed. One of these days, his time would become short, and the freedom which he valued would turn stale and abominable to him.

Meanwhile, winter was over the land in a long spell of harsh weather. Short, dark days, and long nights when he tramped for miles through the bitter darkness.

IX

The reports of Kobling's solitary excursions, as well as information about the hours he spent near the docks, were filed by the young constable who was seeking promotion into the detective force. Under a special system which he had invented, he had also indexed all the gossip and rumour gathered by the Police during their work on the case. Examined impersonally, the total presented nothing more than a conglomeration of fact, fiction, hearsay. But there was a more intimate impression which occurred to the young constable whenever he went to the index.

It gave him a sensation of being close to Kobling during the hours when the latter was awake. And gradually, the whole summary, with its pitiable exposure of Kobling's movements, showed like a history of suffering; something secret, personal, profound, almost too intimate, almost too exhaustive in detail, to be perused.

It disturbed him to examine the summary after that. He imagined that what he was compiling was not of consequence to the Law which wanted first of all clues, then the truth. The pages before him had ceased to relate Kobling's movements,

and were now exposing nothing more than his loneliness, his endless attempts to release himself from his conscience, his anxiety to find a point from which to amend his life. How long would he be able to struggle thus? When would he break down, end his silence, and confess?

But only once had he permitted himself to make any reference to his crime. Once, to a charwoman who had done a day's work for him, he had spoken, but she could not recall exactly all that he had said, although she was certain that he had murdered Pilleger and tried to excuse himself, boasted, too, of his safety. Also, the two detectives from Scotland Yard had disguised themselves and gone to his saloon. But Kobling was sullen, taciturn. They gleaned nothing from him. He was too cautious.

So they began to watch him more closely on his long walks and vigils outside Jim Smith's house, where his wife and child were staying. Nothing resulted. He merely waited opposite the house until the lights went out, then he left, tramping into the country, or returning to the dockside to spend whole nights in the shabby dives and saloons thereabouts. Already, he had a reputation in those rowdy places where, once, he had challenged the bruiser in the boxing-booth, and fought five rounds in grand style before taking the count. He had a crowd of new acquaintances there: men from the ships in the river. But they knew little about him, could not give any information when they were discreetly pumped, except that he was an agreeable chap with plenty of guts and no fear of anything.

Further east, across the Punter River, in the slums and narrow streets there, he had other haunts, other acquaintances. But he might have had dozens of such places to go to, for all the difference it made to his life. He was still a solitary. The contacts he made in those places filled only a few hours of his days or nights, and for the rest of the time he was alone.

And the fact that he never spoke about his crime, proved that the whole of his personal life was something he would not divulge to others. He had parted from former friends. He no longer frequented the places where he had once spent his leisure. He had ended that life, and was trying to make a new one for himself, one based on anonymity.

That peculiar silence was enveloping his past. He was letting it settle over his crime so that presently he could cast off all trace of himself as Kobling, the barber, and take a new identity, perhaps under an alias, perhaps in a foreign city. And time was assisting him. Time and his rigid caution.

That, and the loyalty of his family and perhaps a few old friends or individuals who pitied him.

He was eluding justice. The authorities were losing him. Nothing resulted except this apparently bare record of his excursions. Nothing new or significant rose from it, except to the sensitive imagination of the young constable.

He saw this duel between Kobling and the forces of law and order as something which would resolve itself soon, because the law had many devices and much patience to help it encircle Kobling and wait until one word fell at last from him, or until he chose a confidant who, in an unguarded moment, might betray him, or until from the teeming quarters of lower Punter Ward some speck of evidence was exposed, blown up like dust by time's lazy breath yawning upon it.

"Wait?" the Inspector in charge of the case exclaimed. "Wait? The longer we do that, the more sure of himself he'll feel. You like to theorise, I know. You've got a reputation to make on this case; but I've got a reputation I'll lose on it. That's the difference between us. That's why I can't wait."

"But he can't go much longer. He'll break down soon. He'll make a mistake. He'll tell somebody. Perhaps he's already done so. It isn't possible for a man to live like he does and not give way."

"Why wait, then?"

"Because we'll find him out soon. We'll find the person he's confided in. . . ."

"We'll make that person come to us. We can't afford to wait any more. There's smoke coming from this case still. We must fan the spark and find the fire. We're going to offer a reward for information. A substantial one."

"That's a confession of failure on our part! And we hold all the cards! It's always the last straw, sir."

"I'm looking to the end," the Inspector said. "I'm not worrying about the means."

X

So, within twenty-four hours, the Notices of Reward appeared about the city. They were pasted on hoardings, on the walls near street corners and outside Police barracks. On the blackened walls and temporary hoardings surrounding the ruined areas along the docks where the fire had raged, dozens of them were affixed. By the end of the day thousands of people had read that a reward of five hundred pounds was

offered to any person or persons who could give information leading to the arrest of the murderer of Andrew Pilleger.

There was a great deal of excited comment immediately. Some of it was sarcastic. "They know who murdered Pilleger. They've got the information already. It's just a dodge so that the Police can share the money!"

"That's the funny thing," someone else remarked. "If they have the information, why don't they proceed on it?"

"That's it! What's keeping them back?"

"You can't go out for a pint, and leave the wife and kids, while this murderer is about!"

"Everybody knows who he is!"

"Do they know?"

"The Police know!"

"Who did it? Who was it?"

"Why, everybody knows!"

"Well, who is it, then?"

"I don't know. I 'eard the Police know."

"Why don't they arrest him, then?"

"Yes, why don't they arrest him?"

"What do we pay rates for? There's your bloody Police Commissioners for you! There's your Watch Committee!"

A large crowd assembled about this noisy discussion. People who knew nothing at all as to what was being said, pushed forward to listen, and moved off with the crowd, gathering in others around that angry cluster in the centre. Only a score of men and women knew that the crowd intended to go to the Guildhall and demonstrate there. But by the time they had gone three hundred yards there was a mob a thousand strong piling around them, caught by some faint echo of their purpose, and expressing their anger more plainly than they would have cared to do themselves.

The crowd travelled rapidly towards the heart of the city. It moved like a solid, black wave. It engulfed and carried with it all who were in its path. Three mounted policemen suddenly cantered towards it from three separate turnings. Still it swept on, not faltering. The mounted men drew rein, and the whole of that multitude rolled past rapidly, swallowing the men and their animals, and passing on. The mounted police hesitated to draw their batons, and followed at the fringes of the crowd.

When the mob reached the Guildhall it was confronted by a cordon of Police stretched across the Square. Again, without hesitation, it swept on. The Police checked it for a second,

then it flowed forward again, like a wave risen high. Then, quite suddenly, another detachment of Police appeared on the Guildhall steps, and the crowd's ringleaders knew at once that it would be impossible to storm the place and hold the meeting in the Great Hall. It was decided to address the crowd from the steps instead, to pass a vigorous resolution and present it to the civic authorities.

Unfortunately, only the few hundreds of people immediately surrounding the speaker were able to hear his words, while the greater number of individuals gathered in that vast assembly and in the streets which converged on the Square, had not the slightest inkling as to what the excitement was about.

The speaker was a notorious figure in the city: a sort of popular agitator; one of those souls everlastingly under a sense of grievance against authority. His topsy-turvy mentality showed things to him in a queer, inverted form, but he had no difficulty in convincing himself that he saw the truth; and his eloquence was so direct, and of such simple appeal, that it did not take him long to explain himself and convince his audiences. His ideas were always so astounding, so new and startling to his hearers, that the latter immediately accepted them as truth. What is new, intriguing, easy to apprehend, often strikes the simple, unexercised mind with such clarity as to persuade it that ideas in such a guise are truth. The agitator knew this, for he had inherited his tricks from a father who had practised them on his family. He suffered from his own convictions, as if they were a disease; consequently, he was able to infect his audience with the same plague the moment he opened his mouth.

He declared that the offering of a reward for information, when all the time the identity of the criminal was known to the Police, was nothing more or less than a piece of blatant corruption.

Strangely, this astonishing accusation did not strike much response from those who heard it, for the simple reason that it was altogether unreasonable. Moreover, his own reputation tended to colour his assertion with a certain hue which rendered all his statements unacceptable to wary minds. And in this particular instance he was unable to decorate his theme with the usual fantastic facts. He continued to shout and gesticulate, and the usual line of froth appeared round his lips. He became more eloquent when he saw that his words were not producing the effect he had aimed at.

But by this time reports of what he had declared—had

travelled to the limit of that vast crowd, like a wave caused by a huge rock cast into a lake. When it reached there it began to rebound towards him in another ripple. He heard it coming towards him. He stopped speaking all of a sudden. He wanted to run away. He felt exactly like a mischievous boy who has thrown a brick into an aquarium and hears the keeper coming. Then the wave of derision flowed over him. He put up his hands to shield himself, and suddenly facing the mob, he lifted himself and hurled his own contempt for it in loud oaths. His few supporters had deserted him. Now the Police intervened. He was hustled away, and the crowd was persuaded to leave.

Meanwhile, another crowd, assembled about the figures of some roughs from across the river, had wandered into the lower end of Punter Ward, where the charred skeletons of the mills and factories along the docks jutted into the night sky. There, against the temporary palings erected round that district, it halted. A pot of red paint was procured, and the name KOBLING was daubed in bold letters across all the notices which the Police had pasted there. Then the roughs moved off towards the next hoarding, while the mob pressed forward to the palings to see what had been done. There was a moment of silence, followed by a swelling exclamation of surprise when that red name was seen.

The ruffians made a tour of the district, working very quickly and sending scouts to discover where the notices had been fixed. Finally, one of the bills was carefully removed from its place, and the men hurried off with it to Kobling's saloon. Many idle people followed them as they ran with the notice and the pot of red paint.

Outside Kobling's premises they halted in a semicircle. Some paste was brought from a neighbouring hardware store. The crowd had increased. When the men came running back through the crowd, it was seen at once that they were going to paste the notice on the barber's window. That was the thing! That's the way to make the Police sit up!

So the bill was stuck on. So many hands reached to help fasten it that it glided away. Someone straightened it. The crowd stood back. The name KOBLING was daubed neatly on the foot.

Now the men prepared to fly. It was a wonder the Police had not come on the scene.

"Bring him out!" someone shouted.

There was a pause. One of the men went to the door, first

of all glancing up and down the Road to see if the Police were coming. When he saw that he was safe, he hammered on the door. There was no answer. "Go on! Fetch him out and make him read it!" men shouted.

The fellow at the door hammered again without result. He rejoined his mates and whispered something to them. An instant later one of them hurled a brick at the door. It crashed through the glass; and above the sound of falling fragments it could be heard striking the wooden partition at the back of the saloon.

That seemed to calm the mob's temper. A woman shouted "Shame!" in a shrill voice, and the cry was repeated by others. The ringleaders sniggered.

A woman edged herself to the front and stood squinting at the bill and the jagged hole in the glass of the door. She parted a strand of greasy hair from before her eyes and continued gaping at the damage. It was Lizzie Crane.

"He's not 'ome," she said to the men. "I seen 'im, not long ago, up the Road."

The men looked at her in silence, then they began to edge away.

"Come on, let's get out o' this! Come on!"

Lizzie moved back into the crowd and made her way out of it. Coming towards her she saw Jimsey Jones. This was his night out. He was hurrying forward, craning his neck to get a better view of what was happening outside Kobling's saloon. As soon as he caught sight of her he ran up and began to question her.

"What's up? What they doin'? Who is it? Is it Kobling?"

"They threw a brick through his door."

"Wha' for? Who did? Wha'd he do?"

"They stuck one o' them bills on the window," she said, in her slow, hoarse way.

"Look out! Here's the Police!" he whispered. He clutched her arm, and the two of them scattered with the crowd, making for a side-street.

Meanwhile, the mob at the window had just hurled the remains of the red paint at the glass. It trickled down in three or four lurid streams beside the bill, making a grim sight.

Then the Police appeared. They were led by an Inspector, who began to shout orders the moment he took in the situation. In a few seconds the ringleaders were pinioned by as many constables and rushed off to a van nearby. Four other men, huddled in a knot near the doorway, and guarded by a

constable with drawn baton, watched the Inspector as he came to the window. He stood with his hands on his waist as he read the name daubed on the notice. All at once he put his thumb under a corner of the notice and, with one neat movement, ripped the whole thing off the glass.

The constables returned, and he gave orders to them. The four men were marched to the hardware store and made to get buckets of water, paint-remover, scrubbing-brushes. Then they were marched back and set to work cleaning the mess they had made.

A small crowd, mostly of women, was allowed to watch them. There was a good deal of laughter and comment.

"Hardest work they've done for years! "

"Put some elbow-grease into it! "

"It'll kill them! "

All this while Lizzie Crane and Jimsey were walking in the direction of the docks. They had not met for several weeks, although their last encounter with each other had often recurred to them. Jimsey wanted to ask her if she had seen Kobling again. In fact, he wanted to ask a great many questions, and undoubtedly he would have done so had they not approached a hoarding where the Police notices were posted.

They stopped and read one of them. It was daubed, like the others, with Kobling's name.

"They're all saying that," Jimsey murmured. "All sayin' it was 'im."

Lizzie laid a hand on his arm. She appeared to have recollected something momentous. He felt something come to life in her and communicate itself to him in her touch.

"Jimsey! You remember. . . . The night of the fire. I says to you when I saw you . . . I told you . . ."

"Told me what? "

"You remember. Don't you remember? "

"Remember what? What you talkin' about? "

"What I told you," she said, in a low voice. She seemed apprehensive, almost as if she regretted having mentioned the subject. But by this time he was curious.

"What did you tell me, Lizzie? "

She made a gesture with her free hand, as if she were scrabbling in the refuse of her disordered memory to extract a precious fragment left there and forgotten until this moment.

"I on'y remembered it jus' now," she murmured. "I was goin' round with some cards for that artist, night the fire was . . ."

He did not know what she was saying, but he dared not stop to question her or interrupt her words.

"I come to Andy Pilleger's door and knocked, and 'e come out very angry and says . . . 'e says to me: 'Go away. I'm busy. I'm engaged with Mr. Kobling.' Just like that," she said.

"That's . . . Christ Almighty! That's what they wants to know! Ever since the murder, that's what they been tryin' to find out! Find out if anyone saw Pilleger that evening. That's what's been 'anging them up. This 'ere," he pointed to the Police notice, "it's as good as yours already! Five hundred quid!"

She dragged her arm from his hand and shuddered back from him.

"You shut up, Jimsey! Don't you tell me that! Don't you start sayin' such things! I don't want to get mixed up with any murder business. You let go of me. I'm goin' 'ome."

"Course. All right. So am I. I'm goin' your way."

"I don't want to get mixed up with this murder business."

"Course not," he whispered. "Nor does anybody. Nobody wants to tell on Kobling. Anybody who would do a thing like that for money . . . send an innocent man to the gallows for money . . . anybody who would do a thing like that, is as good as a murderer."

"I don't want anything to do with the reward!"

"Nobody does. It would 'ave a curse on it. Never bring you luck. Haunt you day and night, year in and year out."

"Shut up! It makes me frightened!" she gasped.

"I won't say a word. It's all right so long as we don't say a word. But if anybody else gets to know, it won't be all right. Have you told anybody else about it?"

"I only just remembered about it. When I see you just now, I remembers . . ."

"But have you told anybody else?"

"No."

"Don't, then. Because if you do, you'll as good as kill Kobling."

"I won't. I don't want to say anything."

He walked on with her, in silence for some seconds. Presently, he murmured:

"The money is all right. It's the tellin' what wouldn't be right. All the same, you got a right to that money. . . ."

She trembled, halted, and began to cry out: "No . . . I told you . . . shut up! Don't talk about it!"

"I got a right to the money, now you've told me," he added.

"It makes me afraid!"

He put a reassuring hand on her. "There's nothin' to be afraid of . . ."

"I shall scream!"

In exasperation, he muttered: "Christ! Five hundred quid! And you want to scream!"

She leaned against the wall and groaned, putting her hands over her face. Then suddenly she hurried off, pushing Jimsey away from her, as if she were trying to elude him. But he kept close to her, whispering as he trotted:

"But . . . five hundred. . . . Think of it, Lizzie!"

"No. Leave off!"

"Trust me, and we'll be rich!"

"It's Old Nick's wages!" she burst out.

"Don't say a word to anyone," he went on. "We'll think it out. We'll make sure what we're doin' first. We'll 'ave a good look at Kobling. A thing like this wants thinkin' out good and proper. So you leave it to me."

Lizzie shook her head. "I don't want nothin' to do with it. Don't you say another word! And don't you go telling the Police and bringing me into it. I don't want the money. I'm going 'ome."

"That's right. You go home and go to bed and don't say a word. Leave it to me," Jimsey advised.

"No! You'll get mixed up with the murder! You shut up about it!" she exclaimed.

She halted at the corner of the lane where she lived, and pushing him with feeble motions of her hands, she turned and scuttled fearfully towards the slum.

He grinned as he watched her disappear. He could hardly contain himself. Previously, when he had imagined himself to be in possession of information about Kobling, he had been disturbed and unable to decide what to do. Now, however, there was nothing in his way. His course was clear. If Lizzie would not go to the Police, he would do so. The information was his, to divulge advantageously.

Nevertheless, with the determination set so finally in his heart, he began to feel its weight. It was something which he found difficult to carry in his small spirit. It was heavy. It overflowed. He felt doubtful about his ability to carry it. This information which he intended to give to the Police! It fluttered in his mind, like something vile, and he knew he would never be able to bring himself to that iniquitous betrayal.

Whereupon, he lamented his weakness, his inability to over-

come his sentimental scruples and reach this wonderful fortune. This soft core in his heart had always been the source of his failure. He had never been able to do the hearty, quick things which other men did. He had always wavered at the final moment, withdrawing his hand because he feared to disturb the balance of his conscience which had always been so eloquent about his few minor misdeeds. He hesitated to load it with a major sin, yet he admired the forthright way in which his comrades and acquaintances had behaved. He knew the secrets of their behaviour, their motives and desires, and even hankered for the same things himself. But he could not grasp them. They were too dangerous; beyond the capacity of his little soul to harbour; too much for his modest spirit to encompass.

Until at last, here was a prize glittering at his feet and awaiting him; and here, as on previous occasions when anything of the same sort had promised, his conscience began to gibber at him, making his determination swing to and fro like a compass needle in a storm.

He had already met Kobling. He remembered the day when he had gone to the saloon. He had found the barber to be a man of potent character. To betray such a man would be an audacious act. To strike at so much power, and defeat it by this odious method was something which horrified him to contemplate. He saw himself in the position of the silent serpent, the furtive sneak, the Judas. Yet he was unable to renounce his intention. It was so easy to accomplish. And the five hundred pounds! All he had to do was to go to the nearest Police station and make a statement. Wasn't that a simple matter? And yet, debarring him from it, there was this compunction.

For years, he had dreamed of a moment like this: when his hands would be within reach of a pile of money. He had seen it in fancy, but had never guessed that it would be inseparable from this exasperating prick of conscience. He saw now that something else was required besides a chance. He wanted the callous surge, the force and stride of individuality. He needed a belief in himself. All this was beyond him; he was lacking all these things.

He returned home disconsolately. There, his menial duties engaged him the instant he opened the door, and the crisis which had entered his life was temporarily lessened. But it was like a persistent shadow at the back of his mind; and when lesser preoccupations left him free, it came forth again and tantalised him.

It was in the forefront of his mind when he awoke next

morning. It was heightened by the talk of the sailors in the house. They had the morning newspapers, and from all sides he heard nothing but excited comment on last night's disturbances in the city. All that morning, he fretted, could not decide what to do, was drawn towards the fine prize, then repulsed by the idea of it. He needed faith. He needed to be convinced that he had some sort of right to claim the reward. He needed something which would give him a better purpose than the mere acquisition of the money. And as he thought of all this, the idea occurred to him that he might find a final answer by going to visit Kobling. He might find whether he could match that character. It would be like another trial of strength. But this time he would abide by the result.

That afternoon, after further deliberation, he set out for Kobling's saloon. When he reached the place, he pushed open the door slowly, seeing the broken glass with boards across it. He entered warily, calling cheerfully the moment he was inside.

"How do, Mr. Kobling? I come to pay that tanner I owe you." He fished in his pocket, extracted a sixpence, and put it on the edge of one of the basins. Then he sat down.

Kobling glared at him, and slowly folded the newspaper he had been reading. His appearance was terrifying. He was pale, and his dark eyes seemed full of bitter rage. His movements were equally disturbing. They had a slowness and deliberation which seemed to Jimsey to indicate some menacing current in his thoughts.

"What the hell do you want?" he asked.

"Haircut, please. Not much off the top, but short at the back and sides," Jimsey replied. He pretended not to notice the barber's angry manner.

Kobling stood over him. He appeared to be pondering something, until with one startling swirl of the cloth, he suddenly tucked it dexterously round Jimsey, and lifting the scissors, began to work.

"Haircut! So he wants a haircut!" Then he laughed. Jimsey said nothing.

"When did you shave last?" Kobling snapped.

"Yes'day morning," Jimsey said.

"All right. You want one now. I'll give you a shave."

"Oh, don't bother about that, Mr. Kobling," Jimsey ventured.

"Bother! I never said it was a bother, did I?" Kobling shouted. And suddenly lowering his voice to a more genial tone, he asked:

"Ever had a shampoo?"

"Can't say I have," Jimsey returned.

"Or a face massage?"

"Can't remember ever . . ."

"Or a singe?"

"No," Jimsey answered, apprehensively.

"All right. I'll give you the whole bleedin' works now. You're the first customer I've had for three days, so we'll celebrate!"

"I can't afford all that, mister!"

"Did I say I was going to charge you?" Kobling demanded.

"No, but all the same, mister . . . I can't sit here all that time!"

"Jimsey, you're going to sit in this chair and keep me company. I can do with a bit of company, these days."

"I come for a haircut, that's all!" Jimsey protested. "Tell you, I got no time to sit here . . ."

"You come for a haircut!" Kobling mocked.

"Course I did! What else? This is a barber's place, isn't it?"

"You came for a haircut!" Kobling repeated. Then his rage exploded. "Don't you think I know why you came, you sneaking little bastard! Came to have a look at me! Came to take a peep at the chap they say finished off Pillegger! All right, take a good look at him, so you won't ever forget him! Take a good look! And you can tell your pals how I shaved you, gave you a haircut and shampoo and singe and face massage, the day after a crowd of silly twits like yourself tried to smash up my place! Tell them you're famous. Jimsey Jones, the last man that Kobling, the murderer, shaved! The last man whose hair he cut! The last man to have a singe in Kobling's saloon! The last man to have a face massage! Why, you'll be famous! You'll be in the papers! You'll be able to tell your story and sell it for thousands of pounds. The last customer the barber had before he was led to the gallows! That's what you want, isn't it? Fame! You want your little crust of fame to nibble at! You're like a bleedin' little mouse come out for a crumb of cheese. All right, I'll give you fame, Jimsey! I'll make you famous, time I've done with you! Sit still!"

"You're loopy!"

"Sit still and shut up," Kobling shouted. Then he laughed.

"Time I've finished with you, Jimsey, you'll look like a gigolo. And you'll smell like one, too! I got some lovely lines of perfumed hair-oils!"

Jimsey made no reply. He was thinking of his wasted leisure. "Time I've done with you . . ." Kobling chuckled.

Still Jimsey kept silent. He was angry. He thought no more of his wasted leisure. He was thinking of something else: five hundred pounds! All for saying a few words to the Police. A few words about a silly fool who deserved a punch in the jaw.

"Let him play the fool," he thought. "Thinks he's clever. Thinks he can play a trick like this on me. Doesn't know I got him right in the palm of me 'and! "

XI

Lizzie had gone straight back to her room in the slum house half-way down the Lane. There she sat for a long time before undressing and going to bed. She was apprehensive. She had been worried many times before in her life, but had always survived such vicissitudes. It was not so on this occasion. Instead of fading into misty dreams, the subject which vexed her grew larger until she could not bear it. She got up from her bed and began to walk about her room.

The night was intensely cold and silent. She shuddered; her teeth chattered. Her flesh turned red, then almost blue with cold. She chafed the skin of her hands and arms, put on her coat, blew on her hands. Still she was cold. There was no rest or relief for her. In bed, the dreadful weight of her trouble pressed hotly on her mind. Out of bed, she was miserably cold, and even more perturbed. She heard a distant clock strike two. How still everything was!

She moaned softly, whimpered. Everybody was asleep. The whole city slept, except herself. People in warm beds. Heads in which there were no terrible, anxious thoughts about men who had committed murder, or seen murder committed, or knew something which would bring the criminal to the gallows. No thoughts about little men who wanted five hundred pounds and intended getting it by telling . . . by telling about murders and one who had committed a murder.

She walked restlessly to and fro, trying to warm herself. Someone in the room beneath, disturbed by her perambulations and frequent moans, knocked loudly on the ceiling. She stood still and heard an angry voice curse incoherently at her. She went softly then; but despite her caution, the thin rotting floorboards still creaked and shook. Again, from below, the knocking started. She sat down beside the empty fire-place.

In the next room, the woman who slept there with three

children stirred and started to mumble irritably at the noise which had awakened her. Sitting in the chair, Lizzie heard every sound and movement she made. Several minutes passed. When silence had fallen again, Lizzie rose very carefully and set about making a cup of tea for herself. It was the only solace, the only remedy against the bitter, penetrating cold of this winter night, and her weighty troubles.

Near the fire-place, she had a small spirit-stove. She poured in the oil, lit the little jet and began to pump. She had no idea of the volume of noise which the stove would make in the hush of the night. During the daytime, when there was so much noise coming from the house itself, the Lane, and the surrounding district, the stove made only a gentle, purring sound which was pleasant to hear. But now, the moment she started to pump, the flame began to roar like a piece of machinery full of iron wheels and clanking cogs and thunder. Still she went on until the flame rose. She had put her little kettle above it.

"Won't be a minute," she thought. "A drop of hot water for my tea."

But by this time the flame was roaring terribly. She became uneasy. From below, the labourer who slept there was shouting, thumping the ceiling. The woman in the next room stirred and mumbled angrily again.

"It's only me, my dear," Lizzie called. "Just makin' a cup of tea. It won't be a minute."

Her remark awoke the children. The three of them cried. The woman shouted an obscenity, and they wept louder. That made their mother more angry, and she roared at them, thumping the thin partition and making a sound like gunfire.

The noise awoke other occupants of the house, and all over that warren beds creaked, men and women grunted and began to exclaim angrily. Someone roared. Others replied just as noisily. A great commotion arose. Throughout it, the hiss and roar of the flame in Lizzie's stove was the one persistent sound.

It began to frighten the angry people in the house. Now their shouts took on a different note. Still the rumpus swelled. What was happening? Who was it?

The adjoining houses caught the echoes. Windows were raised, and the shouting began again. Shrill voices shrieked oaths. Doors were opened and closed noisily. Windows were slammed down, and opened again.

"Only another minute!" Lizzie panted.

Steam was beginning to issue from the kettle's mouth. She

watched it, wondering if her courage would last until the kettle boiled; asking herself if her neighbours' patience would last a minute longer, or explode on her. Then she, too, became impatient. The kettle started to sing but would not boil. It maddened her. She stood with her fists clenched over it, panting, whispering to it: "Boil . . . boil . . ."

Someone was running up the bare stairs. She needed only a minute longer, then the water would be boiling. Running to the door, she turned the key in the lock and stood back.

At that instant, whoever had run upstairs reached her door.

"Open this door! Open it! Stop that stove!"

It was the landlady. She held sway over the house and all who lived in it. She was the power in that drab land, and to thwart her was to incur her wild wrath.

"You! Lizzie! Open this door at once!" she shouted.

Lizzie began to cry. "It's boiling now! It won't be more than a second. . . ."

The landlady shrieked. Nobody had ever dared to disobey her so flagrantly. Other steps sounded on the stairs. The door shook. The whole room shook. There was a moment of silence, then one great crash sounded as someone barged the door. The rusty lock broke, and almost immediately the landlady and the labourer from below burst into the room. The door slammed back against the wall and parted from its upper hinge.

"Put out that stove!" the landlady screeched. She was in the centre of the room. Lizzie stood before it, guarding her precious flame, defying the other woman. She was angry. A sense of hurt began to move her.

"I got my rights!" she exclaimed.

"The idea of it!" the landlady screeched, lifting her bony body to full height.

"This is my room! You can't come in without knocking," Lizzie said.

By this time everybody in the house had congregated on the stairs outside the room to watch Lizzie defying Mrs. Kemp. The issue regarding the noise had now given place to this more promising one. Authority was being denied, and because the result was a foregone conclusion in favour of Mrs. Kemp, the lodgers crowded the threshold to learn Lizzie's fate.

Alone with Lizzie, Mrs. Kemp would have behaved tactfully, given a warning, and retired so as not to upset this lodger who paid so regularly. But with this audience expecting her

to show extreme disapproval and exert her authority, she took more violent steps.

She darted behind Lizzie and kicked the kettle into the grate and promptly extinguished the stove. She shook her fist at Lizzie.

"If I ever catch you doin' a thing like that again at this time of night, I'll put you out!"

Lizzie began to cry loudly. The stove was out; the kettle was overturned; the water spilled. Gone were all hopes of warmth, sustenance, ease from her nagging troubles. Anger, despair, dozens of other emotions from occasions buried in her dim past, rose and filled her. She had her rights! She wanted justice!

She began to stamp her foot, to scream. She sat down and beat her feet in a tattoo on the floor. The lodgers laughed. She shrieked louder, while Mrs. Kemp told her to be quiet. Then jumping from her chair, she began to run round the room, finally throwing herself in a fit of hysterics on her bed where, lying face downwards, she took a great mouthful of bedclothes and chewed on them as she wept and kicked.

Mrs. Kemp cleared the lodgers from the room, and made an effort to close the broken door. She was frightened. She knew she had exceeded her rights and trespassed. It was time she made amends.

She went and sat down beside Lizzie to comfort her. She touched her with a gentle hand.

"Now, calm down, dear. Don't say any more. Don't start on again. You've had your cry, so sit up and dry your eyes and come down to my room, and I'll give you a nice cup of tea. All's well that ends well."

But Lizzie was too far gone into all the misty regions of her past to recover so rapidly. Memory had stirred its great body in her. It had come to life. A whole dark world was blowing up to dawn in her, and she remembered wrongs that had been done to her: real wrongs; vile, obscene hurts that had been given her; blows, abuse. A catalogue of wrongs comprising all manner of brutalities. She remembered them all, and moaned of them in a litany which went on till dawn when she slept fitfully, only to wake and begin again.

Mrs. Kemp greatly feared that something more than her behaviour to Lizzie had loosened this flood. There was something else behind it. She felt it. She had an instinct for detecting such things. All this wailing and weeping, all this going on was not because of a little upset which had lasted only for a

minute. It was because of whatever Lizzie was keeping secret. All that day she tended her hysterical tenant, listened to her tearful complaints against all sorts of vague figures who filled her memory.

"Yes, dear. . . . When was that? When did it happen?"

"Not long ago. He said he would give me three shillings for taking the cards round, but he on'y give me two shillings."

"Who did, dear?"

"That artist man."

Mrs. Kemp remembered him. They were approaching the present. But it was disappointing. Lizzie was undoubtedly recovering. She was silent. It was a blessing, anyway.

"There, you're better now, Lizzie. Don't talk any more."

"But I must talk," Lizzie whispered. "If I don't talk, I'll die! It's in the top of my head now, and soon as I stop talkin' it gets at me and makes me frightened."

"It gets at you?" Mrs. Kemp said. "What is it?"

"I can't tell you," Lizzie whispered.

So there was a secret! There was something, after all! Mrs. Kemp pursued it without waiting.

"Many a trouble I've heard, Lizzie. And many a trouble I've smoothed away, and many and many a soul I've helped. There's not much misses me. I'm a woman of experience. Still, if you must keep things to yourself, you'll only be the loser. If you don't want to tell me . . ."

"I can't tell you," Lizzie whispered. "Although it's coming on again. Oh, it's awful! It's horrible! I wish I never knew about it!"

She sat upright and beat her hands together in real distress.

"Knew about what?" Mrs. Kemp murmured.

"I shall scream!"

Mrs. Kemp drew back slightly. This was authentic terror. This was not because of a piece of slander. This hysteria was because of *something*!

"You tell me . . ." she began.

"It's nagging at me!" Lizzie shrieked.

Mrs. Kemp controlled herself. "It wouldn't nag me," she said in a low voice. "And it wouldn't nag you no more, if you passed it on to me."

"Don't ask me to!" Lizzie cried. "He'd kill me if I did!"

"Who'll kill you?" Mrs. Kemp demanded, panting.

"That barber!" Lizzie shrieked.

Mrs. Kemp caught hold of her and spun her round. "Why? Why?"

"Because he was at Andy Pilleger's . . . night of the fire . . . He was there when I called to give Andy a card! That was the night Andy was murdered!" Lizzie moaned.

Mrs. Kemp tottered back and clutched the arm of a chair.

"God in heaven!" she exclaimed. "God in heaven!"

She kept repeating that exclamation. She pressed her hands to her bony bosom. Her mouth opened wide, but no sound came from it. She began to pant; then suddenly she found her voice again, and words burst from her in a-piercing shriek.

"I can't stand it! Oh, it's awful!"

Lizzie sat watching her. She too was crying hysterically. Neighbours in their houses heard the noise and hurried out. Mrs. Kemp came rushing into the Lane. It was now dusk of that freezing day. She stood in the centre of that narrow Lane and supported herself on the arms of her neighbours.

"My God . . . oh, my God . . . here's news . . . here's . . . oh! She . . . Lizzie Crane was there! She was at Pilleger's door, night of the big fire, and Kobling was in with the draper then! She was there! She spoke to Andy Pilleger! She's just told me!"

The women heard her. They looked in silence at her, then at one another. They believed her, but did not know what to say. Other neighbours, seeing a crowd, hurried out and asked for news. The word spread, the noise increased.

A solitary constable on patrol thereabouts sauntered towards the crowd in the Lane. One of the women told him what had been said. He listened attentively with that lofty, detached air which all authority and officialdom strives to cultivate, then he pushed his way quickly through the crowds and entered the house to speak to Lizzie.

By seven o'clock Lizzie had made her statement to the Inspector in charge of the Pilleger case, and a detachment of detectives carrying a warrant had been sent to arrest Kobling.

XII

He was in a large billiard-hall at the north end of Kepnor Road. It was a place he had never frequented regularly. It was more than three miles from his home, and the men who played there were complete strangers to him. Nowadays, however, he was often glad to walk to it and spend an hour or two there, his identity unknown to the parties who patronised the place. He felt himself sheltered for the time by his anonymity, and all his enormous anxieties suspended. The place was a

sanctuary for him, and when he played with the men there, he felt himself to be as they were, his life as even, as monotonous, or shaped by the same conditions as theirs.

Until, gradually, this place with its thirty green tables under the lights, its stir, its sounds of ivory against ivory and the sharp pat of cue-point against ball, became the final haven for him. Here, before and after his game, he lounged in safety, lost to sight in the groups there, being always careful to play at a table at the far end of the hall, always keeping silent about himself. Indeed, except about the progress of the game, he seldom spoke at all. Silence was his safeguard. He kept a ready smile, that was all.

On this evening, he arrived shortly before half-past seven. The table at which he played was engaged. He read the scoreboard and saw that the game had only just commenced between two slow opponents. Two other couples were waiting, besides several other men like himself who had strolled in to pick up a game with anyone who cared to play. Already all the tables were engaged.

He wandered from the tedious game between the slow players, and went to the next table. There, too, the table was booked for three games. Slowly, he sauntered down the hall, and there at a table not far from the door he joined three medical students with whom he had often played.

They were expert players. The four of them settled to a long game. When it was finished, Kobling sat down to rest himself, and presently the three students flopped down near him and began to discuss plans for spending the remainder of the evening. A stranger entered and sat down on Kobling's right hand to await his turn at the table. He asked Kobling to join him, but the barber thanked him and said he had just finished a long game. The other man was silent for a while.

"Funny thing, that Pilleger case," he said at last. "After four months they've managed to get a bit of evidence or something."

"Have they?" Kobling murmured.

"So I heard as I came up the Road. Seems that a woman went to the Police and made a statement. Seems she knocked at Billeger's door on the evening of the big fire, and when he came out to see what she wanted he said he had someone with him—a fellow called Kobling."

"That so?" Kobling said quietly. He seemed preoccupied. He watched the game.

"I reckon he's the one they want. They got him now," the other said.

"What can they prove against him?" Kobling asked.

"If he was there that night, they'll want to know why he didn't come forward and say so before."

"Still, they can't prove anything against him."

"They'll try. They got him where they want him. They'll put him up for trial and find out. They got a warrant for his arrest."

"I don't reckon, somehow, that they'll get him."

"They'll try pretty hard."

"I suppose so. It's about all they can do," Kobling said in a desultory way.

The man nodded, and a moment later got up to play. The three medical students rose too, having decided their next diversion. They bade good night to Kobling and left him. He watched them go. Suddenly, he got up and followed them, overtaking them at the door.

"Going down the Road?" he asked.

"Yes. Like a lift?"

"Thanks. I would."

The four of them hurried out and got into the sports car near the kerb. Very slowly the car edged out into the Road. Kobling sat back. He felt afraid. There was a storm of impatience in his heart at the slow progress the powerful car made in the traffic. Four men in a car! Conspicuous as daylight! And the whole length of the Road was sure to be under watch.

"Better if you took the next left turning," he suggested to the student who was driving. "There's a clear road right through. Runs parallel to this."

The other students said the same. Without a word the student swung the car into the turning, as Kobling had advised. Once clear of the crowded Road, the throttle was opened. Kobling and the others sat hunched down in their seats, and the car roared down the long dark side-streets at a great speed. It flashed dangerously past the lanes and alleys of the locality, and slackened speed only once when it crossed one of the three broad roads leading to the docks.

A constable was standing on the near-side kerb. As the car went slowly past, he gave its occupants a careful scrutiny, leaning forward suddenly. Kobling lowered his head immediately.

It was too late. He saw the constable make a signal for the car to stop, and for an instant he believed and prayed that

the student who was driving had not seen it. The car shot on across the road with a promise of acceleration.

"Don't stop, Tony!" one of the students called to the driver. "Give him your heels! He's only trying to be funny!"

"Go on! Step on it!" another urged.

"That's right. The cocky snoop!" the third man shouted.

They wanted diversion. Kobling's whole soul wanted a means of escape from pursuit and capture. If only he was at that wheel!

"Get on, you fool!" he shouted. "He's after you for speeding! You've got a chance to cut and run!"

But the student at the wheel was mumbling and leaning forward to brake. "No good, fellows. We got to stop. He's got our number."

He brought the car to a halt on the opposite side of the road. Kobling did not wait. He stood up and jumped from the car and braced himself. The moment the constable ran at him he side-stepped and brought him down heavily, viciously. He had learned that throw correctly at last. He turned and ran at full speed towards the nearest turning. He knew the place well. It was badly lit, deserted. He ran swiftly. He heard the roar of the car as it turned into the street. Its powerful headlights cast two beams through the darkness. He slipped rapidly into an alleyway, hardly trying to slacken his speed. He collided heavily against the wall as his body turned. His arm was hurt, and the breath was punched from his lungs. He ran on.

High walls bounded the sides of this alley. His heart flagged as he estimated their height. Still he ran on, going through the alley, and emerging into another street, which he crossed warily. He heard steps thudding quickly through the alley, and the sound of a police whistle.

Opposite, there was a wide lane leading to a warehouse. He entered it quickly, and bracing himself expertly, scaled the wall of the fourth house abutting on it, swinging himself over and dropping silently on the other side, then crouching immediately and examining his surroundings at the moment when the constable and the medical students rushed past in the lane.

He saw that he could not stay here. He was in a concrete yard in which there was not a single point of shelter. The place was so small that he could see quite clearly into the room of the house. A woman was sitting there with a man. Both of them faced him. The beam of murky light from that place reached to within a foot of him, and he dared not move for

fear of entering it. Standing there, he heard the chase recede to the far end of the lane. He knew that the lane ended there. It was a cul-de-sac. He made up his mind quickly. Bracing himself, he climbed the wall and dropped back into the lane, making at once for the street.

He emerged in full view of a crowd gathered in a semi-circle about the entrance.

It was like a blow. His heart swung. But his feet went on, and an innate cunning inspired him, guided him. Holding his head high, he walked to the crowd, scanning it with an authoritative air as if he were searching for someone. He made his way through it, muttering all the time: "Inspector Smith! I'm looking for Inspector Smith," and reached its outer fringe. There, standing alone, watchful and ready, he began to make abrupt signals to an imaginary person far down the road. He beckoned, and finally cursed in simulated anger. Quickly, he hurried off, still beckoning. He felt the eyes of the crowd on him, until he slipped into another side-street and ran.

He ran the whole length of that silent street and halted at last to draw breath. His garments were wet with perspiration. He knew that the entire locality was being combed for him, and that unless he could find a hiding-place very soon, or get out of the city before another hour passed, he would never escape.

He leaned, panting, against a wall. He felt proud of himself. Pride mingled with his sense of danger. What he had done surprised him, thrilled him. It made him laugh. But he knew that it was his first and last flight. It had taken all his resources of courage and cunning, all his ingenuity. Now he was empty. Fear rose in him then more acutely than ever before. He could not think of anything to do to save himself. He trembled. His heart pounded his ribs. He shook with cold and fright and exhaustion, whispering: "Christ . . . O Christ!" and not daring to move.

On the still winter air the sound of a steamer's siren was rising. Once, twice; the echo passing lazily across the tide and the river, and on over the city. It gave him a sense of direction. He walked towards the river, a vague hope of escape moving him, telling him that he might get across one of the bridges and hide himself deep in that quarter where a dozen brothels were open to him. He knew, soon, that it was futile to attempt that journey. He stood still. He tried, desperately, to think of a plan. The effort sent his blood tingling through his body. Sweat broke from his skin. He wan-

dered on, hugging the walls, keeping a watch for policemen.

He halted near a tall house whose windows were lit. He heard someone playing an accordeon and singing in a hoarse, unmelodious voice, drawling the words.

‘Dreaming of you when I am lonesome,
Recalling thy tender farewell. . . .’

The place was a large boarding-house for sailors. Something like a little cog falling into place and setting machinery in motion, seemed to him to move in his mind. A dockside lodging-house! Jimsey Jones!

He ran up the steps and pushed open the door. It was warm inside. There was a smell of furniture-polish and stew. The singing had stopped, and from the room there came the sound of noisy conversation and laughter. He hesitated, staring around him at the hall with its coconut matting like that on a ship's alleyway between the bridge cabins. There was a barometer. SET FAIR. VERY COLD. There was a row of pegs, with uniform caps on them. Three doors opened from the hall. Where was Jimsey?

He opened the door of the room where the sailors were and took a step into the place. A sailor was outstretched before a large fire. He had an accordeon in his hands; and as he moved, little sounds escaped the instrument, making the other men laugh. The other sailors were seated around him, waiting for him to begin again, humming tunes for him to play. Further away, four men were playing cards, and others in a little cluster near the far wall were playing darts.

Some of the men looked at Kobling. He asked at once:

“Jimsey about?”

They murmured the name to one another until one of them called in reply: “Jimsey? Up top, mate; or down below. Just go to the gangway and holler for him. He'll come.”

Kobling thanked him and went out. In the hall, he wondered what to do. He hesitated to trust himself to shout, but at last he cupped his hands and called loudly: “Jimsey! There, Jimsey!”

He heard a door open below stairs, and the sound of crockery, clattering in basins and on washing-tables, rise from the basement.

“Who's callin' me?” someone shouted.

Kobling grinned. It was Jimsey. He ran down to him in the damp and half light of the narrow stairs going down to the

basement. Under a naked gas-light he halted and clutched his arm.

"Jimsey! Pull that door to. I want to ask you . . . I'm done, Jimsey! They're after me!" he whispered quickly. "They got the whole city surrounded. Somebody gave me away."

He looked earnestly at the gaping drudge. "Find me a place to hide, Jimsey. For Christ's sake . . . quick! You're a decent little guy. I can trust you. You're all right, I know. You'd help a chap in a tight fix. Find me a place . . ."

"Tell you . . . There's only my room," Jimsey gasped.

"Let me stay there until I can find a place?"

"No. They'd find you. Mrs. Most, or Kelly . . . they go in and out. Inspect all the rooms every day. Kelly. Has got a duplicate key. . . ."

"Get me a place, Jimsey!"

"There's only a big cupboard. Sort of attic. I keeps me brooms for the top floor up there. Up in the roof."

"Let me in there. Quick! Come on!"

"It's too small. You better push off out of 'ere. I tell you . . ."

"Let me in there. I must get in somewhere. They're after me, Jimsey!"

"Don't talk so loud!"

"Let me hide up there!"

"What? Up there? I tell you . . . it's a cupboard. . . ."

"Where is it? Quick, before anyone sees us here!"

He gripped Jimsey's arm, and dragged him up the stairs.

"Come on! Quick! Show me where it is!"

Jimsey hung back a moment, then he cast a quick look round, peering up the well of the stairs, and finally nodding.

"All right," he whispered.

They crept quickly up the stairs. "If anyone sees you!" he gasped. Kobling dragged him up, making gestures to him to keep quiet and hurry. At the very top of the stairs, where there was no more matting, but only a narrow flight of winding boards, Kobling stood aside and let Jimsey lead the way. They went on tiptoes. It was cold, silent, musty there.

Jimsey opened the attic door. A dark cell confronted them. It was nothing more than a hole, a place in the roof, under the slates, a place for brooms, pails, old bits of furniture, forgotten things that might prove of some utility later. And with all these things, there were cobwebs, and the cold and dust, and the stale, inactive air which exists immediately under the roof of an old house.

"This is it," Jimsey whispered.

Kobling went in almost reluctantly. There was no light except that which came from a small window, a sort of fan-light let into one of the walls. Through this the lights of the river traffic showed.

"It's dark," he muttered.

Jimsey drew the door to. He would not loiter there.

"I'll come up again, soon as I can. Don't you make any noise, meantime. I'll be about an hour gettin' finished down below. I'll be up after that. Bring you a bit o' grub."

Kobling said nothing. Jimsey closed the door softly and sped quietly back to his work. He was amazed. He could not credit what had happened. This was fate! This was a visitation of fortune! But too much; too much of a good thing! Too heavy a hand; too lavish! He was excited, unable to think.

He had told Kobling he would return within an hour. He had made a bad estimate. It took him three hours to finish his work in the basement, for at a late hour the crew of a coasting vessel docked for repairs came to the house. He had forgotten they were due to arrive this night.

It was nearly midnight when he crept upstairs and opened the attic door. Kobling was almost sobbing in chagrin.

"You bleedin' little rat! You forgot all about me! I'm frozen stiff! I'm starving!"

"Shut up! You got nothing to grumble at! I been workin' all the time you been chewin' your nails up here!"

Kobling trembled with the cold. "All right. Give me some grub, and something to drink. What have you got?"

"Here's a bit of steak and some pie. Think yourself lucky. But you better clear out of here to-morrow."

Kobling did not reply. He was already devouring the food. In the silence and darkness of that place the noise he made was like that of a voracious dog.

PART FOUR

THE PRISONER

I

IN a hardware shop not far from the house, Jimsey bought a little door-bolt which he took back and gave to Kobling late at night.

"Fit this on the door, and lock yourself in," he said. "Nobody ever comes up here, but you never know. The old gal, or Kelly, might pop in, just for bad luck. But if they try the door and can't get in, they'll think it's a broom or something stuck against it. Tell you . . . Tell you another thing, too. I can't be runnin' up 'ere all sorts of odd times. We got to get this business straight, so I'll tell you what: I can bring up a bit o' breakfast for you, round about eight when I comes up for buckets and things. I can put a bit of grub and a teapot in a bucket. After that, though, you'll have to wait until late at night. I'll slip you some papers and mag'zines to keep you going. You'll have to keep quiet, though; and God knows how you'll stick it up 'ere. You better keep your overcoat on, and keep some newspapers round your feet. . . ."

"Oh, shut up about that! You bring me some grub twice a day. That's all you got to worry about."

"Think so? Think I'm not runnin' a risk?"

"Who's to know I'm here, you little fool?"

"Don't talk silly! The Police is goin' through this district with a fine comb! Tell you, it's a risk! Tell you, I'd get six years if they caught you here! And if Kelly or the old woman found out, I'd lose my job!"

"Well, they won't. Besides, I'm going to make it worth your while. See this key?"

"Go on."

"Take it. It's the key of my place. You can go in when you like. You'll find some money there. You'll find some things I want, and you can bring them away when you get the chance. . . ."

"What, and walk right into the Police! Walk right into a booby trap?" Jimsey exclaimed.

"There's the key. You'll find the money under the wardrobe in the back bedroom. More than fifty quid, and my cheque-book."

"I don't want no money! All I wants is to get you out of here."

"What's wrong with the money?"

"I'm doin' this to oblige you. . . ."

"Don't argue. Do what I tell you. You're a decent guy, Jimsey. But get the money, because I want you to buy a seaman's rig-out for me."

"Wha' for?"

"I want to get away on a boat."

"Nothin' doin', mister. No hopes at all. I don't want no money, nor nothing to do with boats, or seaman's berth, or smugglin' you out."

"Take this key!"

"Tell you . . ."

"Take it, or I'll pull this place down the stairs, and you with it!"

"Give us it, then."

"Listen, Jimsey. You get the money, and the cap and jersey and jacket and things, then you let me know when the agents are taking on crews. I'm fit. I can stoke as good as any trimmer. I can sign on."

"All right. I'll do my best. I got to be off now."

He closed the door and crept down to his own little room on the floor beneath. His good fortune pleased him. There was money in this. Not the fifty quid Kobling spoke of, or anything that might come from the cheque-book, but a larger sum. More than the five hundred pounds which the Police had offered, and which the chattering Lizzie had let slip from her grasp. Perhaps a thousand pounds of a reward now that Kobling was a fugitive from justice. He had him here safely. He had him under lock and key, snug, out of sight. And there was no need to make involved plans. There was a risk, but he would take that. He had him here, his prisoner, and when the proper time came, he would sell him.

"I got him where I want him! Never had to lift a finger to do it, neither. He just pops in. Fate! It's Fate, passin' a full house to me. When it's time, I'll get him out, and hand the silly fool over to the coppers. Thousand quid!"

Then for hours at a time he dreamed of himself as a person favoured by destiny to reach this fortunate climax. The grave risk he was running occurred to him only at rare intervals, and

even then he could not fully conceive it. Thoughts of the rich reward he would earn when he turned Kobling over to the Police filled his hot mind. He waited on his prisoner, tended him, tried to keep him amused. Days passed, and the barber's manner underwent a change. He was no longer aggressive. He did not demand food, or curse when it was poor in quantity or quality. The bitter, dangerous flash had gone from his spirit, and he had become almost fawning. He was always cajoling something or other from the willing Jimsey. He wheedled news, cigarettes, clothing. There was no end to his requests.

That frightened Jimsey. He realised what had happened. He had imagined he held Kobling prisoner, but the truth was that the barber had annexed him! He tried to think where this would end. Kobling would slip away one day, leaving him to face a charge of harbouring him.

He was terrified. He kept away from his prisoner all that day, did not take food to him or clean out his attic. He was afraid to go near him. Kobling would demand freedom, and he would not be able to refuse it.

He wanted to wash his hands of him, forget him. Let him rot! Let him decide his own fate! He had done with him. Done with the thousand pounds; done with the risk. -No more of this nonsense. No more running up and down, fetching and carrying.

So, all day, he remained downstairs at his work. When night came, he went to his room and got into bed. He was tired. He tried to sleep. It was difficult. Despite what his mind had decided, there was something else in him which was not yet persuaded about Kobling. It spoke to him, telling him that he was responsible for the barber, saying that he could not renounce his task now that he had accepted it. He trembled violently, groaned. Then he sat up and started to dress himself.

He ran down to the deserted scullery and gathered some scraps and a pot of cold tea. He put them in a bucket and hurried upstairs with them. The attic door was open. That surprised him. He entered, prepared for abuse, whines, perhaps worse. He flashed his torch round. The place was deserted.

His man had flown, and with him had gone all chances of the reward. But something else was gone too: his responsibility. He sighed. No more worry about the risk. No more shocks. He admitted that the affair had been too big for his hands, too cumbersome and involved for his limited experi-

ence. He knew that he had not handled it properly, had not guarded his prisoner with purpose and spirit.

He turned to go. Someone was on the stairs, creeping up. Kelly! Mrs. Most, come to see who was prowling the house! He drew back, hiding the bucket. He heard footsteps falling faintly, cautiously, and the laboured breath as the person climbed the last flight. Then he knew it was Kobling, and he flashed his torch on him.

Kobling pushed him aside and entered the attic. Jimsey could see he had been running. His breathing was terrible. His whole body moved only with an effort which the little air he breathed into his exhausted lungs permitted him. He flopped down on the floor, and the parcel which he carried rolled from his hands and burst open.

"Where you been?" Jimsey whispered, sinking beside him.

Kobling did not answer. He heaved himself into a sitting position, and groping for Jimsey, caught hold of him. Jimsey bent nearer to hear what the barber had to say.

"Where you been, mister?" he repeated. "I been lookin' for you. I got some grub here. Did they chase you?"

Kobling gripped him with both hands. He found his tongue.

"You blasted little swine! You let me sit here without food for twenty-four hours in the freezing cold!"

His voice was hoarse. His breath rattled in his throat and gave a menacing tone to his words.

"You left me . . . no food or drink! I had to bolt out to get something. I went home and got some things. One might . . ." He broke off and fished with one hand in the open parcel. His hand came up again, holding a heavy revolver. He jabbed it against Jimsey.

"You listen! You bring me grub regularly! And you go to the shipping agents and find out about hands for a boat. I want to sign on and clear out of here. Don't you leave me stuck up here!" He shook Jimsey violently to and fro. "You try any tricks on me, and I'll finish you off! I'll knock you stiff! I'll make you sorry! You do what you're told. . . ."

"Shut up! Let go . . ." Jimsey whimpered.

"I'll let go!" Kobling growled. He dropped the revolver and aimed a blow at Jimsey. It caught him on the cheek. He swayed back on his buttocks, and scrambled to his feet; but Kobling got hold of him again, and struck him, making him fall heavily on the floor outside the door. Then he rushed at him, and with one last blow sent him rolling down the stairs.

Jimsey tried to regain his balance. His hands grabbed at the

banisters, but missed. His arms and legs, flying wide and bucking, made a great commotion as his body bumped down the stairs and landed on the floor outside his own room. He heard Kobling growl at him, then the attic door closed and the little lock clicked. In a great fright, he gathered himself and rushed into his room and scrambled quickly into bed.

His heart was pounding. He listened, afraid that the noise had disturbed the occupants of the house. But all was still. His heart calmed then. But his face hurt him. It was cut; and all over his body, little bruises began to pulse painfully. His heart rejoiced, however, now that he had regained his prize and could once more contemplate the thousand pounds.

It was time he reaped that reward. He dared not delay any more. It was time he went to the Police and said: "I got an idea I know where he's hiding. So if you'll be at the corner of Grelston Street, near them shipping offices . . . see? You be there, and he'll walk right into your arms, 'bout eight o'clock, to-morrow night. That's the information. Now what about the reward?" And it was time he humoured Kobling in his plan about getting off as a fireman.

"Yes, mister, there's six wanted for the *Port Arthur* what's sailing on the ebb 'bout eleven-thirty to-morrow night. You got to sign on at six, and be on board at quarter to eight. Be there at that time sharp, to muster for watches. Slip out behind me, and follow me to the shipping offices. And I'll leave you there. Then you'll be all right. You'll be fixed up safe and sound."

It was time he did that and said that. He went to sleep determined to do it. He awoke with the intention still in his mind; and it was as feasible, as simple and as attractive as ever.

When he took food up to Kobling, the latter was morose.

"Here! I've been studying the papers about the shipping. All those shipping papers you gave me. There are boats due to sail to-morrow. You go round and find out if they want hands. And come back quickly and let me know. That's all you've got to do," he said.

"That's what I'm goin' to do," Jimsey replied.

II

From that grimy window, Kobling could see a stretch of the river beyond the blackened ruin of the timber store and the docks. He saw the traffic on the river: the ferry, crossing to and fro; the slow barges; the tugs nosing and backing; and the

tall prows of steamers appearing slowly. Everything in that little scene made him restless. He was excited, tantalised, made impatient. He caught hold of Jimsey when he appeared.

"What did they say? Any chaps wanted? Did you go?"

"Nothin' doin' yet. One sailing next week."

Next week! Four more days! He went back to the window. Winter sunlight flashed on the river. The winter wind blew along the tide and rippled the surface of the dark-green waters. Gulls circled, hovered above the scum and the moored steamers, cackling their desolate cries. Sirens hooted, or made shrill, fussy sounds which the wind carried across the city. He knew that all these sounds and movements were only a part of a greater world beyond this port. A world which embraced the oceans and ports far beyond this one. A world of fine cities on coasts flashing in the sunlight. Thousands of men sailed to those coasts, but how many of them wanted freedom as much as he did? How many of them relished or appreciated their freedom, their fortune? His whole being lifted itself at the thought. He longed to be able to exchange places with them. He stared at the river again.

Until the mists shrouded it. Then his thoughts returned from their long journeys, and his body which was cramped and chilled and sluggish through lack of exercise began to revolt against its confinement in this cupboard. He tried to be patient, and told himself that Jimsey would get him a berth soon, that four days was not long to wait. It was hopeless. His body trembled violently at the restraint it suffered in this hole. He wanted to shout, to use his strength, to feel tired, to live, not to think. Cramps travelled from his feet to his calves and thighs. He tried to perform exercises, but the place was too small. He could not stretch his arms and legs without striking the walls or the sloping roof. He could scarcely breathe.

He read the newspapers and magazines which Jimsey brought. They were mostly mercantile papers with shipping news. He read them from cover to cover, again and again, until he knew the names of all the ships in port, and had memorised the new arrivals, the sailings, all the shipping intelligence printed there. It had no other effect than to arouse his impatience.

He became angry. His rage flared in him until he could think of nothing but how to satisfy it. He longed for Jimsey to appear. He reckoned the hours which would pass before he came up, and he fed his fury with promises of blows and

curses. All day he waited, boiling with his lust. Dusk fell. He had nothing to do then but wait in the darkness. He could not read, for he dared not use a light. He was hungry and thirsty. He opened the door and went out on the little landing and flexed his legs, did a few exercises. That was the sole relief which darkness brought him.

From below came all the noises of the house. He craved then for company and conversation. A ridiculous notion that he had lost the power of speech came to him, and he started to whisper to himself, to mumble, finally to essay a few words aloud in a normal tone in order to reassure himself.

"Sign on . . . fireman . . . ship. Next week we sail. In the first engineer's watch."

His voice sounded unfamiliar to him. He spoke again. It was odd that the words he uttered were always about ships and berths. They came of their own volition to his tongue. When he had spoken them, he felt his anger and impatience and sense of frustration rush into his body from where they had been waiting from behind all his thoughts.

He began to suspect that Jimsey had not gone to the shipping offices, would never go, would turn him over to the Police and claim the reward. He sighed at his awful peril; and again all his anger flowed through his body.

But the moment he heard Jimsey coming upstairs, his whole feelings were transformed. He could not understand that. All the bitterness, all those terrifying ideas, all the anger that had risen from them, sounded by him now to give him purpose, moved him only to a slobbering self-pity.

"Jimsey! That you, Jimsey? I been waiting all day for you! Can't you get me a ship? Can't you do something to get me out of this place and on a boat? I'm stiff with cold! I can't move in this place! My Christ. . . . I'm going silly!"

In a whisper, Jimsey replied: "I told you, next week. Next week. Here's some stuff for you. I got to be off now."

"Here! Wait a minute! Don't go. Where's the papers? Didn't you bring me any newspapers?"

"Tell you, I ain't got time to be runnin' round for you all day! I can't sit 'ere, listenin' to your bleedin' troubles! Tell you, I got plenty of me own! You shut up, and not so much whinin'."

That hurt Kobling. He felt ashamed, humiliated. And with this sense of shame, some of his anger returned.

"All right. Clear off! Shove off, then! You yappin' little

skunk! And listen! You look sharp about that job, or else out I march and get it myself, and if they get me when I go out, they'll soon find where I've been for over a week! Go on, get downstairs!"

"Tell you, you're unreasonable, mister. Trouble with you is, you don't know what I'm doin' to help you. You think too much about yourself."

"Oh, shove off, and leave me alone!"

Jimsey sniffed. The door closed behind him. Kobling ate hungrily. The food warmed him. He slept fitfully after it. He wanted sleep, but his body made no claim to it. Lying awake in the cold and darkness, he remembered his former sound sleep during those years when he had been tired after the days in his saloon.

The whole of that life seemed remote, and the memory of it almost too cherishable to contemplate. As he recalled it, he felt his heart coldly encircled, as if a mist were descending on him. All that former life was over, but a new one had not begun for him. He was suspended in this wretched uncertainty, and already he doubted whether any avenue of escape would open for him. He mistrusted Jimsey. Often, thinking about him, he doubted his allegiance. He knew so little of what that little heart held, and felt that anything could set it off its meagre balance of fidelity. No doubt, the Police were advertising a larger reward which would tempt Jimsey's tiny soul with dreams of wealth too splendid for him to avoid. And it was upon that frail, untrustworthy character that all his own huge hopes reclined. He had trusted Jimsey to bring him from this hole; trusted him with his secret. Now he was completely in his power. It was disturbing.

He shook with fear up here in the darkness and silence, with the sea-mist shrouding the district and blotting out even the pricks of light from the river traffic.

But in the morning there was sunlight; and in the sky, immense rounded clouds, white as snow, towered into the pale blue of the heavens and were reflected in the river. So much space and light opened to his sight that the miserable bonds about him seemed to melt momentarily, and his crime which had brought such confusion into his life became no more than a minor misdeed.

He took fresh hope. He was cheerful; he greeted his unwilling captor with a grin.

"Good old Jimsey! On time with the grub, as usual! Never lets a pal down! Best little guy in the world!"

"Yeh! Easy for you to be so bleedin' cheerful! All you got to do is to sit on your backside all day. I got to do all the thinkin' and runnin', and take all the risk!"

"Don't worry about it, Jimsey boy! I'll be out of here in a few days. You wait. Only a few more days. . . ."

"But who's got to get you out, eh? Me! Who's got to run the danger? Me!"

"Never mind! Only a couple of days now, Jimsey pal. Listen! When I'm out of here and sailing off—when I'm started abroad somewhere, and things are going all right—I'll write to you, and ask you to come out and join us. Me and the wife and kiddy and you, Jimsey! We'll start a business. . . ."

"That's puttin' the cart before the horse!"

"Why don't you look on the bright side, Jimsey boy?"

"Bright side! 'Cause there ain't none! You talk about gettin' out of here! The papers say the Police is offerin' a thousand quid for you. For information what will lead to the arrest of John Walter Kobling, or . . . or the person or persons what are 'arbouring or causing him to be 'aroured from justice! I tell you! Tell you, they've searched houses not fifty yards from here! Last night, in the mist, they closed in! That's their idea. Every day, they draw in closer. They got an idea you're somewhere round here. Tell you, you can't walk fifty paces in the dark without bumpin' into a couple of them, then three more, then a whole bunch. . . ."

"Shut up, will you! Shut up!" Kobling exclaimed.

"Here's the paper. Read it for yourself," Jimsey said.

"Take the bloody thing out of my sight!"

"Read it," Jimsey said, tossing it to the floor.

"Jimsey! You get me some female clothes. A woman's outfit. That's the thing! You get me some now, and I'll clear off right away!" Kobling said, excitedly.

"Don't talk daft! Wouldn't any shop-keeper get suspicious if I was to march in and ask for skirts and coats and things? Don't forget there's a big reward out for your arrest. Tell you, any shop-keeper would give you away. . . ."

"I could give you an address—give you half a dozen—where the girls would give you the things for me," Kobling said.

"And then they'd sell you out! Chance of a lifetime!"

Kobling stood over him, pleading. "Jimsey, I've got to get away from here soon. What about the boats? What about papers? I'll tell you, Jimsey! You offer a chap fifty quid for his papers! Fifty quid, to give you his papers and let me have

them. Simple. Some of those chaps would jump at fifty quid! ”

“ Not when there’s a thousand quid waitin’ to be lifted. ”

“ Don’t be silly! ”

“ Silly? It’s sense! Everybody wants to collect that thousand, I tell you! ”

“ Jimsey! You go to my missus, over in West Ward, and tell her about me. You explain. She’ll listen. . . . ”

“ She knows already, I bet. Knows all about you. . . . ”

“ Listen. Tell her to let me have some clothes: skirts and shoes and stockings and a hat and coat. You tell her to have the car at a certain place. Tell her, Jim Smith’s car. I’ll drive off somewhere. You tell her. . . . ”

“ Think I’d ever get near her, with the Police watchin’ the place? Don’t you think they’re watchin’ the place where she is, in case you turn up? ”

“ Don’t be silly! For God’s sake, do what I tell you! ”

Jimsey lifted a derisive glance at him. “ You mad? ”

“ If you don’t do what I tell you, I’ll give you a hidin’! ”

Jimsey laughed. “ Oh, go an’ shoot yourself with your pop-gun! ” he said, trotting downstairs.

Kobling sighed. He knew that what Jimsey had told him was true. He was hidden up here and did not know, except by report, what was happening in the city. But he believed Jimsey, and knew that the Police were encircling the locality. His position here was untenable. He would have to get away.

But how to escape the cordon, and where to go when, and if, he did get through were two questions which lifted before him at every turn of his thoughts. They were the final obstacles at which he had arrived after the events of the past months.

III

It was as much the promise of that great reward as the fear of arrest for his complicity in the affair, which harassed Jimsey. Both swayed the uncertain current of his imagination: the first with dreams of wealth; the other with a prospect of imprisonment.

What terrified him was the fact that it would be difficult for him to give information and claim the reward without endangering himself too. He knew he had dallied too long, and should have gone to them a week ago. Now he was in as much peril as the barber. He could no longer sit at ease and dream. Time was pressing. The Police were coming nearer.

He must get rid of Kobling, somehow. But how, how?

The necessity for action, for a fresh plan, pressed on him. It perplexed him. Fortune had given him this opportunity for making money, but he had been too slow. His tardy wits had not accepted the chance. Now he was snared.

Wherever he went, he heard the same story. The Police were searching. What chance had Kobling now? They had him. He was in the net, and very soon they would bring him out. It would be all over in a couple of days. But there were other rumours, too. They said Kobling had got away. They said a woman was hiding him in her room. They said that was why his wife had left him—because he had taken up with this woman who was no good. She lived over the river. But the Police would get him soon. There was a cordon round the city, and inside that cordon there were others, all closing in.

Jimsey saw policemen who made the cordon. One night he passed a posse of them at a street corner. He retraced his steps slowly, and spoke to the Sergeant.

"I got some information."

The Sergeant and the three constables looked at him without much interest. It seemed odd to him that they were not impressed. It made him afraid. If he could not get rid of Kobling in this way, there was nothing else to do but wait until the Police searched the house.

The men went on staring at him without speaking. It was not encouraging. It made him feel that they were suspicious of him. That made his task harder.

"It's about Kobling," he said. His voice was only a hoarse whisper, and he was sure that the four men noticed how frightened he was. All of a sudden they looked at one another, then the three constables looked at the Sergeant, who said:

"All right. You stay here while I take him to the station and hear what he's got to say. I'll be back in half an hour. Keep your eyes open, and don't lose touch with the others."

He made a sign to Jimsey: and without waiting for him he set off rapidly, with Jimsey trotting to keep him in sight. When they drew level, Jimsey ventured to glance up at him; and it seemed to him that the Sergeant had expected this moment, had been prepared for what had been said to him, and was not at all surprised or impressed by the fact that some information was about to be given which would end the whole affair.

"Thought I ought to let you know," Jimsey ventured.

Without looking at him, the Sergeant said tersely: "Save

your breath until we get to the station. You can do your talking there."

Jimsey was nonplussed. He had not imagined it would be like this. He felt humiliated. He was being treated like a malefactor, like a suspect. The Sergeant hurried along, making him run. People turned and stared at them. He felt more uneasy than ever. His heart was beating with his exertions and his fearful thoughts, beating like something knocking to be released, like his horrified conscience beating at him for his odious betrayal of Kobling.

They hurried on. It took them ten minutes to reach the station. He had imagined that he would be received as a person with something important to relate, and had seen himself being made much of. He was brought in like any common miscreant.

"Sit down," the Sergeant mumbled, pointing to a bench. He left Jimsey and went to the Sergeant on duty.

"Came in a hurry," he remarked, jerking his thumb at Jimsey. "Is he inside?" he added.

"Go on in, there's nobody with him," the other said.

Now the Sergeant seemed quite jovial. "Come on," he said to Jimsey. "Let's hear what you've got to say."

A constable went ahead of them down the passage. "What is it, Sergeant?" he asked.

"Another one with information."

"That makes seventeen to-day," the constable said.

"All after the dibs."

The constable opened the door for them and they went in. The Sergeant saluted the Superintendent, who was seated at a large desk. The senior officer looked up.

"More information, Sergeant?"

"This man says he has something to tell us."

"You have information you wish to give us?" the Superintendent asked Jimsey.

A constable came forward with a notebook and began to take a verbatim report.

"I thought I ought to let you know, sir," Jimsey said.

"Very well. What is your name?"

"Jones, sir."

"Full name, please. And address."

"James C. Jones. That is . . ."

"Jimsey Jones, of number ten Harkness Square, Riverside Road?"

"Yes, sir. How did you know, sir?"

"That's too long a story, so we won't go into it now. Let's hear what you have to say."

"That's the thing, sir. I thought, you see. . . . It's like this. Tell you . . . Last night, and the night before, about half-past seven, I was going out, and had just got about as far as the corner of Riverside Road when I gets a bit of a shock. Who should I see coming towards me with his hat pulled down over his eyes but . . . but Kobling."

He waited for the officers to make some comment, to express interest. They did not move or speak or express the slightest surprise. The young constable finished his shorthand note and waited for Jimsey to continue. There was a long silence.

"Go on, please," the Superintendent said.

"So . . . so I follows him, and he walks to the docks and has a look round there. Looks at the offices to see the notices about chaps wanted by the stevedores. Looks round and goes off."

"And what did you do then?"

"Stands and thinks about it."

"Go on."

"That's all, mister. Last night and the night before. Same place. So you can see what he's after. After a job on a boat! See? Now my idea is this: I comes out of my place and goes to bring some of your chaps to-morrow night at a quarter to eight. When I picks them up, I leads them to where he goes, and . . . there you are. You arrests him, and then it's all over!"

The Superintendent sat back in his chair and held his pencil in his fingers.

"Just a moment. What was the route he followed?"

Jimsey faltered a moment. "It was . . . it was Riverside Road, then across the Square towards Punter Dock, and along to the offices at the corner near the Customs House."

"You're certain of that?"

"Certain."

"You're positive?"

Jimsey swore that had been Kobling's route.

"Sergeant," the Superintendent said, "had you any men posted thereabouts last night, or the night before?"

"I had four men in the Square. Two at the entrance to Punter Dock. Two at the corner near the Customs House. Two in plain clothes outside the shipping offices near the Customs House."

"Did they report Kobling's appearance at any time?"

"No, sir."

The Superintendent turned to Jimsey and smiled faintly.

"Go on, Jimsey. You were saying . . ."

Jimsey did not smile. "That's all, mister. That's my idea. I leads you to him and you arrests him. To-morrow night, at a quarter to eight, down there. . . ."

"You're certain you'll be there?"

"Oh, yes, mister."

"What about Kobling? Will he be there too?"

"Oh, yes. I reckon he'll be there."

"To-morrow night?"

"That's the ticket."

"Your night off?"

"That's it, mister."

"You get one night a week off?"

"Two, mister. Sunday night and one weekday night."

"Except this week, when you've already had three nights off, eh?" the Superintendent said.

Jimsey grinned. "I took an hour off last night. Same the night before."

The other smiled broadly. "That was clever of you," he mumbled.

"Nothin' clever about that," Jimsey said. "I just walked out."

"I wasn't referring to the way you walked out; I was referring to . . . but never mind. Tell me, Jimsey. Do you know Kobling very well?"

"Pretty well, sir."

"Is he a friend of yours?"

Jimsey hesitated. That was a difficult question to answer.

"Well, he sort of is, and isn't."

"I understand. Now, let's see: what is it we have to do? We wait for you, where?"

"I should think . . . out of sight, in case he spots you. Say in Reeve Lane."

"Very good. We wait in Reeve Lane, and you come to us as soon as you see him taking a stroll. After that, you take us to him?"

"That's the way, mister!" Jimsey said.

The Superintendent looked squarely at him. "Jimsey, I shouldn't be surprised if this doesn't lead to his arrest and conviction and execution."

"Then it means . . . it means I'll come in for the reward?" Jimsey ventured.

"Oh, yes. If we get him, you get the reward."

Jimsey could not look at him. He rose. There was nothing more to say. Strangely, he did not feel pleased with himself. There was silence in the room. He felt mean and dirty and unhappy, as he waited for the men to speak. But they said nothing. The constable opened the door wide, and they all watched him as he went out alone; then the door slammed loudly behind him.

He hurried home. He had done something monstrous and could not bear to think about it. Other men did things as bad, worse; but laughed and forgot them. But he could not forget what he had done. It was irrevocable. No use trying to forget it. It hadn't been so hard to do, after all. The difficult part of it was now, afterwards. He had not foreseen that. When he had set out, he had imagined he would feel like some of his former shipmates when they had returned from escapades in the Boca in Buenos Aires, or from places in New Orleans and San Francisco. They had laughed, then they had gone to sleep and snored loudly, while he had lain awake shuddering at the thought of what they had done.

He hurried upstairs to his room and changed into his apron. A thousand quid! That was the thing to think about! Keep to that, and forget about giving a poor fellow away to the Police!

But the idea of the money had no charm. It was dead, flat, unattractive. He didn't want the money now. Wouldn't touch it even if they offered it to him. Keep the bloody stuff! Stick it in the Poor Box for orphans!

He had something else to think about. He had to decide about Kobling. What was he going to do with him if he did not continue in this plan with the Police? How would he get him out of this house? And if he failed to keep his assignment with the Police, it was just as likely they would visit the house and make a search.

He could not see ahead. His mind would not function under the strain of this affair. He felt dizzy. He had done something foul, earned the reward but brought upon himself perils and reproaches which his spirit could not suffer.

He was tired and sick; he wanted to sleep. He got on his bed and snatched half an hour's rest. It made him feel so much better that he imagined he was as callous as some of his old shipmates. His sickness had passed; and when he remembered what he had done, he did not feel cold in his belly or heart, but was full of courage. It was time he saw Kobling.

In the kitchen he concealed food and tea in a bucket and carried them upstairs to the attic.

"Got some news for you," he said, as soon as Kobling admitted him.

"What is it?" Kobling asked quickly.

"Arkwright and Wellis; you know—down near the Customs House. To-morrow night at twenty to eight. You've got to be there to sign on for a ship what's leavin' at three a.m. Twenty to eight. . . ."

"Arkwright and Wellis?" Kobling said. "What's the ship?"

"I forget. Arkwright is the agent. One on their list."

"But where is it for? Is it a foreign port?"

"Course it is! Tell you, I went to a lot of trouble . . ."

Kobling was impatient. "But what ship? What port? That's what I want to know!"

"I can't remember. They'll tell you when you get there."

"You can't remember!" Kobling exclaimed. "Of course you can't! Nor could anyone! Because there's no ship sailing to-morrow or the day after at three on the ebb! I know! There's only one vessel on Arkwright's list in port now. It's a coaster, in ballast. I know what's going on in this port! I got all the shipping news. That's what I read all day up here. I know all the ships in port, and due in, and due out. . . ."

"After all the trouble I been to!" Jimsey whined.

"You lying little swine!" Kobling said.

"Goin' down there, and waitin' about with a lot of chaps makin' fun of me and saying: 'Hullo, Jimsey! Jimsey Jones! Here's Jimsey Jones with a broom and a bucket to sweep the waves off the decks!' Waitin' there, couple of hours. . . ."

"You never went near the place!"

"After what I've done for you!"

Kobling made a grab at him and caught his arm, suddenly jerking it behind him. Beneath his strong hands he felt the skinny, weak flesh wince as he twisted the arm slowly. Jimsey's body lifted in agony.

"Oh . . . let go . . . let go of me. . . ."

"Where d'you go?"

Jimsey hissed in pain.

Kobling twisted the arm a little more. "Where d'you go?"

"Arkwright . . ." Jimsey cried.

"You rotten little scab!"

"Arkwright and . . . oh! Let go. . . . I can't stand no more! "

"Went to the Police, didn't you? "

"I can't stand it! " Jimsey cried.

"Speak the truth, or I'll give it another twist! "

"I said . . . "

"You've been to the Police? Come on, tell me, or I'll break you to pieces! "

"No . . . please . . . I went to Arkwright and Wellis. . . . "

The stiff little body went slack all of a sudden. Jimsey had fainted. In the murky light, Kobling saw his face, pallid and relaxed. He shook him, smacked his cheeks, thrust him away and waited. At last Jimsey stirred. He was crying.

Kobling took hold of him again. "Now then! Shut up that blubbering and tell the truth! Come on, out with it! "

"I told you. . . . I told you already! "

"All right. Another twist. Now . . . "

"Stop! Stop it! "

"Not until you've told the truth! "

". . . the Police . . . " Jimsey sobbed.

Kobling let go of him at once. He drew away from him. There was a long pause.

"God! You rotten little Judas! " Kobling said.

Jimsey was crying. "It was' the thousand quid," he mumbled.

"You're . . . my God, you're . . . " Kobling muttered. He stirred Jimsey with his foot. "Get up! "

"I'll tell you . . . " Jimsey whimpered. "I'll tell you what happened."

Kobling said nothing. He listened to the whole story. Still he said nothing. He was making desperate plans. They came readily to his mind in this pass, but he would not divulge them to Jimsey who begged him to tell him what he was going to do. They were his own plans. He was alone. He had reached a realisation of that ultimate loneliness which is the state of every soul. He knew how to act now.

"I'll help you all I can. They said quarter to eight. . . . "

"Get out! " Kobling said. "Clear out of here! "

"You can trust me now, mister," Jimsey tried to tell him.

He would not listen. "If you don't clear out, I'll twist your neck! "

Jimsey went downstairs. His left arm was numb. Later, some feeling returned to it; then the blood coursed through it like boiling water or fire; and all night he lay groaning and

turning, unable to sleep because of the pain. From above, he fancied he heard Kobling snoring.

IV

Shortly after three o'clock on the afternoon of the following day, a saloon car was driven from the garage of a house in Langley Crescent, which is in the West Ward of our city.

Jim Smith was driving. He had come home for the afternoon from his training quarters in the country. He felt like a schoolboy home for a brief holiday. His manager had given him strict orders not to eat cake, white bread, or chocolates. No tea, beer, or cigarettes. And he was to be back at the camp by half-past seven at the latest.

Behind him, Dora and Kit were seated with Lettie between them. When the car had gone a short distance, Lettie climbed to the seat beside Jim. At once, Dora said softly to Kit:

"Why don't you be like me, and not worry about anything? Live in the present! That's the way to face a thing like this! It's no good looking back, and not much good looking forward. Anything might happen. Things happen whether you think about them or not, so let them come, the best or the worst. You can't alter them, so give it up. Let Fate decide. Your fate is a part of you, so leave it to make a good job of things."

"But him . . . there . . . somewhere . . ." Kit said.

"Leave him to fight it out."

"But if they get him! If they get him!"

"You can't stop them by thinking about it."

"I want to help him. I must. I can't sit and wait."

Dora said: "You know you couldn't do a thing without the Police finding out."

"I want to go with him. I want to be near him now, when he hasn't got anybody."

"Oh, give it a rest! Please. He'll get himself out of it alone. Don't talk about it!"

"All right. I'll be quiet."

Dora laughed. "It's such a relief when you don't talk about it," she said.

Kit smiled. "You're blunt."

"I'm not, Kit dear. I'm only honest. It's no use talking about it. All the city is off its head about the affair. All going mad and saying first this, then that. I won't think about it."

It's no use. All we can do is to keep calm. Now let's stop mentioning it. Where's Jim taking us? "

"Where we always go," Kit said.

"Heavens! He loves that grubby little village! All the summer, it was the only place he wanted to go to. The country tea houses! The country butter and eggs! Bread and butter and jam, with wasps in it! "

What attracted Jim to the place was the long motor road leading to it. It had only recently been opened for use. It ran for seven miles along a high, wind-swept ridge in an un-deviating course built upon a track which the Romans had used. On either side, fold upon fold of verdant country stretched to the horizons, or met the mists rising from the winter fields. He had little interest in these scenes. His sole pleasure was in driving along that windy road at full speed. He had done it before. All cars using the road did so, passing one another so quickly that they made only a sound like a quick gasp as they drew abreast.

It was thrilling. They felt the engine taking a life of its own from this speed. It had happened before, but not quite in the same way as it did now. That was odd to Jim. He felt the car leap a fraction beyond control, into a state which he feared instantly. He knew when to slacken speed, and he tried to do so now, at the moment when he knew he ought to. They were approaching the end of the road, where it turned down towards the village, and it was time he cut out the speed. But there was a second or two before the engine became obedient. He sensed that wilful moment. It was mysterious. He tried to curb the car, and reduce its pace. It resisted, then responded; but it was too late.

He knew it was too late. He tried to crush all speed out of the car by using the brakes. He applied the foot-brake and the hand-brake. He saw what was coming round the bend of the road: a motor pantehnicon; a snub-nosed yellow vehicle with a trailer. He kept his nerve. He held the brakes on, but he knew the car had not answered in time, and that unless he could check its terrific momentum, they were going to strike the front off wheel of that yellow monster nosing its way round the bend and filling the roadway.

The women began to scream, and the child shuddered up against him. He thought, momentarily, that he had a chance, if only the pantehnicon would come round quickly and get on the straight and give him room. It was taking the corner so slowly. Something in him became frenzied, and he shouted

repeatedly: "Round . . . round . . . round!" Then he stopped shouting, because he knew the lorry and its trailer would not be round in time.

The locked wheels of the car skidded, and the car went round in a wide lurch, broadside on to the pantechicon. Still he held on, letting the brakes free and wrenching round the wheel in a final attempt to snatch control and use the dregs of the car's momentum to skirt the looming yellow vehicle. But it was futile. There was only a savage recoil from the car.

He swung himself away from that side, and put his arm over the child as the car crashed against the nose of the towering lorry. He saw the agonised faces of the driver and his mate, then amidst the crash and rattle of broken metalwork, the lorry seemed to ride through the wreckage, lurching over them, pressing and smashing. He felt his right arm sting. He was crushed against the child. He wondered fearfully when motion would die out of this wreck and the women stop screaming. A moment later, everything was still, quite still.

He was dazed. He heard himself shouting: "Round . . . round . . . come on!" Then he stopped because he knew there was no need to shout. Faces loomed around him. He turned to find Dora and Kit, and groaned at what he saw. He struggled to force a way from the wreckage. The men were hacking at the door on the near side and taking Lettie out. They dragged him free and climbed in quickly to get Dora and Kit.

Dora screamed: "I'm all right! I'm all right! Kit . . . it's Kit! Get her out!"

The men scrambled over the seats because the door was jammed. They did not speak. They panted loudly, their mouths open, their faces pale, as they leaned down and lifted Kit. They brought her out and put her on the verge beside the road.

Jim lurched towards them. One of them took hold of him.

"You're hurt. Take it easy. . . ."

Jim pushed him aside and stared down at Kit. The man who was kneeling beside her looked up and shook his head.

"She's in a bad way."

Jim swayed. Air: the damp chill air smelling of the cold fields. Faces, and voices, and more cars, all floating about him and towards him, the noise and motion striking his senses with an impact which hurt him. Then, suddenly, a big face detaching itself and coming so close to him that it seemed to move right through him and reach a deeper part of him than

all the other faces. One of those large affable faces, and a voice of calm and authority. A man who knew what to do in an emergency.

"You'll need to get her into hospital quickly. Let me run you down into hospital in my car. Don't wait. Leave it all to me."

That was at twenty minutes past four. Dusk was over the city as they drove down and sped through the streets. Dusk, lights, the glitter of traffic and early evening. The cinemas lighting up, and the trams and 'buses from the Punter Ward full of workpeople from the great mills. Lights, and the beginning of leisure. The changing into nice clothes; the evening meal; the peaceful hours; the hours of pleasure. Drink, laughter, love. But behind him in the car the whimper of the child. Dora's exhortation: "Hurry . . . oh, hurry . . ." and Kit's strange cry.

Until, mercifully, the hospital door. Casualty Department. White silence. Tiles. The white jackets of porters and a young house surgeon. Their calm, even when Kit was lifted out and there was so much stain all down her right side. The stretcher holding her body at last and disappearing on a trolley towards the operating theatre, with nurses and a porter around it. And the heavy, sickish odour of ether and disinfectant. And another nurse and another house surgeon attending to Dora and Lettie, while another nurse dressed his arm and prepared it for the house surgeon's examination.

But outside, in the hall, the whole affair beginning to take importance. News! What's this . . . Kobling? The name?

The lorry driver telling the constable: "I come round on my proper side, careful . . . and you can see the marks on the road, all right . . . careful, 'cause I had a load on and my trailer. Slow, careful. Down he comes. . . . I knew . . . knew what was goin' to 'appen. I tried hard to get round quickly, and he tried to throttle down, but he had too much speed. . . . He hung on, though, and tried hard to get his car straight. Then he come on me, side on, hard. All in a flash. Just like that. Not a chance."

"Driver's name: Leonard Gill. Mate: Bert Tonkin. Name of injured woman: Kit Kobling. . . ."

News! Sensational! Because now he would have to come out of hiding at last! Kobling!

The reporter who had hurried in because he had been told there had been an accident on Sturm Ridge, held his notebook

in his left hand and wrote shorthand notes. No. Just give me the facts! Facts! News! Hurry!

He had it all at last, two pages. A corner; a pantechicon with a trailer; a saloon car roaring along the Ridge; a skid; cries; the crash. Then news! News that would make a story! Something significant! Clear the lines! Let it through! Let this through, because this would make a sensation!

"Lend's your 'phone, Porter!"

He waited impatiently. Red-hot news! Anything might happen now! It would set the whole city listening, waiting, watching.

"Hullo! Hullo! Brady? That you, Brady? Livesay, here! Livesay, you twirp! Livesay! Listen. . . . Shut up and listen, I've got news! Listen! Clear a line for me to Mr. Craig, at once. CLEAR EVERYTHING OR I'LL MURDER YOU! News! IT'S NEWS, AND IT CAN'T WAIT!"

He heard the connection-point snap in. He saw in his mind the flashes, the headlines.

"SERIOUS COLLISION ON STURM RIDGE"

"SUSPECTED MAN'S WIFE SERIOUSLY INJURED IN MOTOR SMASH"

He drew breath. His heart was beating quickly. What a stroke of luck for himself! Then, Craig's sharp voice:

"Well? What is it, Livesay?"

Mr. Craig was the News Editor. Livesay said quickly: "I've got news here, sir. I'll read my notes. I'm at the hospital." Then he read quickly and expertly over his notes.

"Fine!" Craig said. "Now, again. I want to get this through for the early seventh. Now. . . ."

Livesay read again, going steadily, precisely, while Craig got it all down.

"Well done, Livesay! I'll see you later."

The news went into the early seventh edition, which was cleared of two columns about Spain and China to make room for this more urgent information. Shortly after seven o'clock the newspapers were on the streets.

V

At seven o'clock Jimsey went up to the attic. He wanted to know what Kobling was going to do. He was in a state of nervous exhaustion. He felt ill, afraid. It was approaching the time when he would have to meet the Police.

"We better clear out," he said. "Make a bolt for it!"

"Get out of here!" Kobling exclaimed. "I know your game!"

"I only want to help you, mister."

"Clear off, before I punch you stiff! Get out!"

"You won't get far round here. Tell you, they're thick as flies in the streets, mister."

"Shove off and get your thousand quid!"

Jimsey said nothing. He did not move.

"What are you waiting for?" Kobling exclaimed. "I haven't got the thousand. Hurry up and meet your friends."

"I ain't goin'," Jimsey said.

"I've got something here that'll make you go," Kobling said, prodding him with his revolver. "You're going, and that's a certainty. You're going to meet them and take them to where you said you would. . . ."

"Where you goin'?"

"That's none of your business. You take them where they want you to, and tell them I'm armed. That's what you agreed with them, and now you can go through with it. You're in this, like I am, up to the neck. Now you can stay in."

"Won't do no good, mister. You can't get past them by yourself. They'll get you, and they'll get me too. Might as well try to think out a way with me. The two of us. . . ."

"Get out!"

"Tell you . . ."

Kobling got hold of him in a rush and threw him out.

Jimsey went down the stairs and out to the street leading from the Square. He had no clear notion of what he would do. He walked a little way and halted, leaning back against the wall. A lorry from the docks came through the street. He recognised the driver and waved to him. The man waved back. Next moment, Jimsey ran into the roadway and hailed him.

"Goin' across town, Ted?"

"No. Goin' to a place in Rainey Park, to get some stuff for shipment."

"Give us a lift, will you?"

"O.K. Hop up!"

Jimsey ran round the nose of the lorry and climbed quickly into the seat beside the man. He had made up his mind to leave the city. He huddled down in the seat until he was almost bent double. Ted laughed.

"What's up? Got a pain in your guts?"

"I'm cold. Want to get near the engine for a bit of heat."

"It's a cold night," Ted said.

They drove out towards Kepnor Road. When they were waiting at a cross-road for the traffic lights to change, Jimsey saw a newsboy with a placard. He read what was printed on the sheet, then he beckoned the boy and bought a paper.

"SERIOUS ACCIDENT ON STURM BRIDGE. LOCAL BOXER
IN SMASH. SUSPECTED MAN'S WIFE IN
CRITICAL CONDITION."

"That'll be that fellow Kobling's wife, I reckon," Ted said. He drove across the road and pulled up. There was a street lamp there, and he and Jimsey read the headlines by the aid of its light.

"Poor devil," Ted said. "I feel sorry for him."

He went on reading the report while Jimsey sat back in silence beside him.

"I'll hear a bit more about this in a minute," Jimsey said when Ted gave him back the paper. "I'm goin' to the hospital this evening. That's why I come out. Come out to get a taxi to take a seaman to hospital. Got five bob to pay the fare. So when I gets there, I'll find out a bit about what's happened."

"What's wrong with the chap?" Ted asked.

"Hurt his leg down 'atchway. Gone septic."

"What d'you want a taxi for? I'll run you over for half a dollar. I'm going that way," Ted said.

"Be a row if Mrs. Most got to know. . . ."

"I can wait at the corner and pretend I've come for some luggage."

The suggestion appealed to Jimsey, and he clutched at it.

"All right, Ted. Hurry, though. It's about half-past seven. He's supposed to be there at a quarter to eight."

Ted turned the lorry. "Won't take ten minutes to get over to the hospital. I'll go right through. Go direct through."

They drove back towards the Square, and at a spot near a turning about thirty paces from the house the lorry was brought to a halt while Jimsey got down and returned to the house. He carried the newspaper with him. Very quickly, but quietly, he went upstairs and knocked on the attic door. It was opened at once. Jimsey went in and closed the door after him. He gave Kobling the newspaper.

"Listen to me, mister. Listen, for God's sake! Here's

a paper all about it. Read what it says here. Then hurry. I got a chap outside waitin' for us with a lorry. . . ."

"What's this? Clear out!"

"No . . . read . . . read it!"

Kobling flashed his torch on the headlines.

"This chap says he'll take us across to the hospital. Get us over there in ten minutes. All you got to do is pretend you've hurt your knee. That's all. He wants five bob. . . ."

"It's a trap!" Kobling exclaimed.

"Read it! Read it, you bloody fool! Come on, while you got a chance! We'll get you over so's you can see her. You jump into the lorry and I'll cover some sacks over you."

Kobling knew that this was his moment. His chance. He looked at Jimsey. Little Mercury bringing the tidings. The eternal condition: man's hopes, ambitions, secrets, awaiting the messenger. Jimsey was tugging him.

"For God's sake . . . come on! Don't wait!"

"All right, Jimsey boy. I'm ready," Kobling said.

He scrambled into his overcoat and put on his hat. Jimsey saw him put the revolver in his overcoat pocket.

"Hurry . . . hurry, mister. . . ."

They crept out to the little landing and peered down into the well of the stairs. Then Jimsey beckoned, and they went down on tiptoe, very quickly. Some seamen came out of the mess-room as they passed. One of them exclaimed: "'Ere, Jimsey! What about that washin' o' mine? You said . . ."

"Be back in a tick, Bill! Be back soon. See about it then," Jimsey said, over his shoulder. He and Kobling went on. At the top of the steps leading to the Square, Jimsey said: "Lean on me a bit, and limp." Kobling followed the order, and together they approached the lorry.

"Hop up, quick! Quick!" Jimsey whispered.

Kobling got aboard, and Jimsey followed him. "Now give me a quid for this chap."

Kobling gave him the money, then Jimsey covered him with some sacks lying there.

Getting down, he bolted round to Ted and climbed in beside him. "All right, Ted. Let her go. Make it sharp. This chap's in a bad way."

They moved off at speed, taking the direct route through to the hospital; cutting up through the slums to a point in Kepnor Road. They were halted there by the Police cordon. Sliding down near the clutches and gears, Jimsey whispered: "Tell them you're goin' to Rainey Park!"

Ted brought the lorry to the kerb as two constables approached the vehicle.

"Where you from?" they demanded.

"Docks. Loadin' for a boat to Amsterdam!"

"Show your licence!"

Ted handed it down to them.

"Where are you going?" they asked.

"Rainey Park to pick up some luggage and crates for shipment."

"Got anything loaded behind?"

"Empty."

They handed back the licence and signed the lorry through.

"What's all that about?" Ted shouted to Jimsey, when he let in the clutch and drove on.

"I reckon they're looking for Kobling," Jimsey said.

Farther on, a little distance from the crossing, there was an excited crowd.

"Poor sot," Ted muttered. "He'll never get through there."

They drove on quickly. Once, Ted said: "Who is this chap behind?"

"Off the *Stephen Jarmey*," Jimsey replied.

Ted did not speak again for several minutes. Throughout the city, at all the main cross-roads, there were little crowds like the one they had first seen. Ted could see newspapers fluttering as people stopped to read about Kobling's wife; and he thought it was bad luck for Kobling. The Police were out in force, because they knew he would attempt to reach the hospital to see his wife. And crowds of people were standing near the Police because they wanted to see Kobling arrested as he was on the way to visit his dying wife.

"Look at the silly twits!" Ted shouted.

And outside the hospital gates, he shouted again: "Gosh! Look at that lot! Thousands! All waitin' to see a poor sot come in to visit his wife!"

Jimsey trembled. He could not think of what to do, and he did not try to. He trusted something in himself which was alive and calm, older, wiser than the mind which controlled him at most times. Seeing the crowds, he suddenly remembered an occasion when he had been taken to hospital late one evening, and had been delayed at the gates by a van which was delivering an empty coffin. In less than five seconds, a crowd had drawn round the ambulance in which he was lying.

He turned to Ted and whispered: "If they asks what we got, let me talk. Don't you say nothin', Ted."

Ted kept silent. He could not have spoken. He was puzzled and slightly scared by Jimsey's behaviour. He sensed that something was wrong. He drew up at the closed gates as the Police came round.

"Where you from?"

"Let's through!" Jimsey shouted back. He climbed down and signed to the porter. "Open up, mate!"

"Wait a minute!" the Sergeant called. "What have you got in this lorry?"

Jimsey laughed, strutting about with an air of authority.

"Get up and take a peep!" he said.

The porter stood at the gates, waiting for the Sergeant's word.

"We got a coffin, if you want to know! Take a peep!" Jimsey said.

The Sergeant grinned, and made a signal with his hand.

"Go on ahead!"

The crowd laughed. The porter opened the gates as Jimsey ran round and got up again beside Ted. Once in the hospital grounds, Jimsey showed Ted where to drive the lorry.

They drew up at a door-way on the far side of the gravel courtyard. "Now pretend to give me a hand with . . . with the coffin. They can't see much of us. Let down the side-board while I open the door. Here's a quid, Ted. When the door shuts, you shove off, back to your job. Just drive off quick to Rainey Park. Don't say anything to anyone, ever. Come on. Quick!"

They got Kobling out between them. As soon as they were inside, he found his feet.

"Thanks . . . you're pals! Thanks," he said.

"Now shove off, Ted," Jimsey said. "You're all right. They won't . . ."

"You're a cunning little wangler!"

"Shove off, Ted. I told you. See you some day."

Jimsey and Kobling heard the lorry drive off as they went down the corridor. "Which way?" Kobling said. He ran on ahead and stopped a nurse. She pointed to a flight of stairs, and Kobling hurried up.

Jimsey followed him slowly. He was drenched with perspiration, cold, sick, and exhausted. He had used up all his resources. He had brought Kobling and himself this far, but could not think of a way to bring either himself or Kobling out again. He was dizzy. The smell of ether and disinfectant which filled the air in the corridor, made him retch. He longed

to sit down and rest, he was so tired. He wanted to think, in order to sort out all that had happened within the past half-hour.

He followed Kobling up the stairs. There would be no more rest until something was done about getting Kobling and himself safely out of this place. He felt he ought to keep near Kobling. He could see him hurrying ahead along this upper corridor, so he hastened after him. This was where the wards for women were. He saw rows of neat white beds as he ran past the doorways. Far ahead, at the end of the corridor, Kobling turned into the last hall. Jimsey sped towards him, but halted and kept at a distance when he saw what was happening there.

Kobling was there, looking at a woman who had just come from the ward. She was sobbing, while a Sister tried to comfort her. Jim Smith, with his arm in a sling and his head bandaged, stood facing Kobling. Only the Sister spoke.

"She went quite peacefully. There was no pain. We did everything possible . . . all we possibly could."

Jimsey went out of earshot. He knew what had happened. He went to the stairs, and leaning on the rails rested himself, peering below. He saw a constable turn off from the corridor below and come up the stairs.

He ran back to Kobling. "Here's a copper! Mister. . . . Come on! We got to get out!" He plucked Kobling's arm. He appealed to the boxer.

"We got to get out of this place!"

"Go on, Wal! Don't wait here, old man!"

The boxer signed to him to run. Jimsey dragged him. They got out of the hall and were down the first few steps of the narrow, emergency stairs near the end of the corridor before the constable reached the boxer.

They heard a slight commotion above them. "Jimsey," Kobling said, "which way out of here?" They halted in the lower corridor. A young probationer came out of a store-room carrying a pile of snowy sheets and pillow-cases. As she passed them Jimsey stopped her.

"Nurse, which is the back way out? We got to go out the back way."

She eyed them for a moment before replying. "I don't think there's a back way. There's the way out through Casualty, and the emergency door out of the Nurses' Home. . . ."

"That's the one: the last one. Nurses' Home. . . ."

"Oh, well then, you go to the right here, then take the first left, and there's a little door. Through that."

They thanked her and hurried off. "Come on!" Jimsey whispered. "Hurry! We got a chance!"

"A chance for what?" Kobling said, lagging behind.

"Shut up! Hurry! Here's the door. A chance to get out!"

"It's no use."

"But we can get out this way," Jimsey insisted.

"Where to, then? What are we going to do when we are out?"

"Keep quiet, will you! Quiet now. I'll open it slow and take a look."

Kobling pushed him aside and walked boldly out into the street. He gave a hurried glance to right and left in that quiet, dark place before he beckoned Jimsey out. Jimsey followed him and closed the door softly. They began to walk further into the dark locality which bordered the rear of the hospital. Gradually, however, they slackened speed and halted. For the first time, they both realised that there was nowhere for them to go, nothing they could do. They leaned against the high wall bounding the hospital grounds. It was windy and deserted thereabouts. Opposite them, a street lamp spread a flickering uneven light on them. They moved on a little way, out of its dim light.

"I'm done up," Jimsey murmured. "I could do with a drink. Do with some grub. Do with a bleedin' good sleep, too."

Kobling said nothing. He spat viciously. Jimsey thought about him then; and venturing a covert glance at him, tried to discover in his expression an indication of his feelings. But the other had the same inscrutable look, the same grim, assured manner as ever. Nothing of the tragedy which had taken place in the hospital was visible in his expression.

"What about you, mister?" Jimsey asked.

Kobling beckoned with his head and went on until they reached a point in those empty streets where three roads converged. The tall backs of furniture depositories, and such places as stables and disused carriage works, were on all sides, some lit by a few lights, others empty and silent. A little public house stood between an alley and one of those places. Jimsey and Kobling could see its lights, and a few glasses of beer lining the inside of its windows. As they went past it, a sour odour of beer in the wood was whiffed up at them from the

slit above the cellar on which their feet made a hollow sound. They heard the rumble of voices inside the place.

"Could do with a bloody good drink," Jimsey muttered.

Kobling heard him but did not make any comment. Further along the street, there was a fish and chip saloon. It had a wide window permitting a view of its steaming interior where, at a shining range neatly surrounded by white tiles and polished ventilators, a stout woman in a white apron was tipping a tub of raw chipped potatoes into the boiling fat. Beside her, a bald man was carefully dropping cutlets of pasted fish into an adjoining vat. The potatoes made a pleasant hissing sound, and the cutlets going into the hot fat and oil set up a similar spattering. Much steam arose. It smelled warm and appetising.

The counter ran on two sides, one facing the street, the other running at right angles to it and flanking a row of cribs. At the counter were several youths and two elderly women waiting to be served.

Kobling halted suddenly, and without speaking turned into the place with Jimsey at his heels. He went to the crib nearest the door and sat down. When the bald man came to serve them, Kobling made a sign towards Jimsey, and the bald man turned to him for the order.

"Don't you want nothing?" Jimsey asked. Kobling shook his head.

"Well, I do," Jimsey said, rubbing his hands. "I want four penn'orth o' chips, and a fourpenny cutlet, and a dash of vinegar on the lot. That's eightpence. Here you are."

When the bald man had gone, Jimsey said: "Why don't you eat a bit, mister? Do you good. Might want some grub before we get a chance to feed again." Kobling shook his head. Then Jimsey relapsed into silence. He was tired. His head nodded the moment he closed his eyes. Kobling woke him with a nudge when the fish and chips were brought. The bald man grinned when Jimsey started, but after that he seemed more interested in Kobling, whose silence and grim, reflective manner, combined with his peculiar pallor, excited his curiosity.

Kobling watched Jimsey eat. He envied him his hunger. Even to feel hungry and thirsty seemed to give a purpose to Jimsey's insignificant life; a very good purpose. And as he watched him, he wished that he, too, could feel hunger and thirst, coldness, tiredness, any of those things. It would have afforded a purpose to his body, made him more mindful of

himself, given some sort of foundation or direction to his being. As it was he felt nothing at all. He was numb.

He knew his body was cold, but he did not feel any need to consider it. He was tired, too; and in his heart there was a dismay, a sense of loss, too final and immense to remove, too awful to consider. But he would not let himself feel any of these. Weariness, pain, or despair. He was unmindful of them. Even his sense of loss was numbed. Somewhere between his senses and that part of his brain which translated or organised their perceptions into the pattern of his life, there was a gap.

He was empty. He was an outcast, a fugitive, no longer a part of the scheme of life. This was where all his efforts had brought him. He did not know what to do with the life which he still possessed. Men were hunting him to take that life from him. He knew that. It was the only reasonable thought he was able to achieve. He wanted to defend what was left, but he had no notion of how to do it.

Jimsey offered him some of the chips and the fish. He shook his head, smiling faintly.

Jimsey went on eating until his hunger was satisfied. He leaned back against the high boards of the crib, belched softly, licked his lips. He rubbed his hands together while his tongue explored his teeth. He looked pensively at his plate. His eyes closed almost at once, and his head sank forward on his chest. The ragged, dirty tweed cap which he wore, slid forward over his nose. He looked ludicrous. Kobling grinned as he watched him. Some chips were left on the plate. Kobling took them up with his fingers, dipped them in the salt and ate them slowly, one by one. By that time Jimsey was snoring.

His thin snore made the only sound in the place. Suddenly, Kobling sensed that hush. It was ominous. No conversation. No laughter. No spluttering fat. Only an occasional rising bubble of oil sounding in the empty vats. He listened. He heard the man and woman whispering to the customers. It made him apprehensive, and he looked at Jimsey and put out a hand to stir him, but stopped all at once and kept quite still for several minutes, trying to overhear what the others in the bar were whispering.

After a while, he took some notes from his pocket and slid them into Jimsey's pocket without disturbing him. He rose slowly, and left the crib; then without haste, he strolled from the place, conscious of the curious glances of all who were

standing at the counters. Once outside, he set off at a great stride further into the heart of this district.

There was a light wind gusting from the north. It was icily cold. A frost was already covering the roofs. Above, in the darkness of the winter night, the stars and planets burned with a trembling light, remote and cold, like sharp points pricking the sky's depth. Kobling walked for several minutes as if he had decided on a course. His hands were buried in his overcoat pockets; and with his collar muffled round his neck, and his head tilted down against the wind, he appeared rapt and determined. At the next corner, the full force of the wind caught him. It blew stronger thereabouts, and checked his stride as he moved round the corner. His hand went to hold his hat to his head, while the other gripped the collar of his coat and closed it tightly round his neck. He halted and backed against the wall. The wind rushed past him like an invisible cataract, shoving him aside with its rude flurry, and pinning him against the wall. All the motion of determination had gone from him, and once more he was without direction or purpose or activity. He loitered at this windy spot which was frozen, desolate under the winter night.

He fancied he heard the sound of hurrying feet above the rattle of the wind. He listened, instantly stiffening, backing taut and alert against the wall, as the fancy became reality. Involuntarily, his right hand closed on the revolver in his overcoat pocket. This was the climax of that long pursuit which had been set against him the moment Pilleger's body had been found. This was the moment, the end. A fierce thread of chagrin, hate, exasperation, traced itself across his mind, but he did not know upon whom to cast it. He poised himself, lifted the revolver as the sound drew nearer.

Jimsey came scuttling round an instant later. He was panting and murmuring. He had run quickly.

"Give me the slip . . . the slip! Paid me off like a bleedin' supercargo!" he muttered angrily.

He collided with Kobling. "There you are! Start you give me! Thought you was a copper. What you go for? Leave me like that!" he exclaimed rapidly.

"Don't be a fool!" Kobling replied. "Go back home."

"Go back home! The way you talk! Go home, he says!"

"You get mixed up with me and you'll get into trouble." Jimsey laughed briefly. "Trouble! I'm in trouble all right!"

In for good, looks like. Same as you. That bald bastard back there went and told the Police. We got to get in somewhere, out of this, quick. . . ."

"Let's get on the move," Kobling said.

They walked quickly off in the face of the wind. A little way on, two women passed them. Jimsey tugged Kobling's arm and halted, turning and whistling to the women. The latter came back slowly, walking arm in arm.

It took Jimsey no more than half a minute to make a bargain with the women. After that, the four of them sauntered off, walking in pairs. They went on for half a mile to a tall house which was one of many in a little terrace once fashionable, but now decayed and given over to tenement landlords. They had hurried here, without speaking, all of them anxious for shelter. One of the women had a key. She went ahead and opened the door, then all four entered.

When the door closed behind them, the woman with the key struck a match. Jimsey and Kobling exchanged glances. The place was sordid, bare. Its hall was cold, the plaster had flaked off in great slices, leaving cracks through which the wind entered. Still, the house was shelter. Jimsey and Kobling followed the women upstairs and parted on the first floor at rooms adjoining each other in a bare passage. Below in the street, the sound of running feet was loud and portentous. It echoed through the quiet house. To the women it was without significance. They beckoned to their partners to enter, then the doors closed and the noise faded.

The woman with whom Kobling had gone, removed her hat and stood before a mirror patting her hair. Kobling remained near the door, where he had waited while she had lit the gas globe. She gave him a quick glance over her shoulder. He was staring at her pictures, and occasionally letting his eyes stray to the other objects in the room. A lot of her visitors did that. It seemed to her that they wanted to familiarise themselves with the surroundings. She looked at herself again in the mirror and, satisfied with her appearance, lit a small gas fire in the hearth and stood back, slowly waving the smouldering match as she watched the jets. They flared for a few seconds, then slowly expired. She looked significantly at Kobling. He gave her a shilling which she promptly put into the meter; then the jets rose again, and in a minute or two the little room was quite warm.

She had removed her coat. Kobling was looking at the pictures which flanked her bed. On one side were portraits of

Hitler and Mussolini, on the other were two nudes floating on clouds.

"Nice, aren't they?" she remarked. "I mean them over there. Them two girls. The others are a couple o' guardian angels some gentleman gave me once. I call them my guardian angels."

Kobling said nothing. He stood motionless near the door, staring about him. His body made a great shadow on the wall and ceiling behind him. It was grim, and seemed to fill the room. The woman frowned slightly.

"Won't you come over and sit down near the fire? I won't be a tick," she said.

Kobling murmured his thanks and went and sat down in a little wicker arm-chair facing the fire. It creaked under his weight. He sighed, and stretched out his legs. After that he was quite still, staring into the flames.

Behind him, the woman was undressing. She moved slowly, taking her time and talking to her visitor as the garments fell from her hands.

"You're a quiet one, if you don't mind me saying so. I don't mind, though. I can put up with it. I'm like that. If a man wants to talk, I can listen. If he wants to sit quiet and cosy, I can sit quiet too. I think it's nice to sit like that sometimes, although I must say I like a bit of fun."

She stepped from the last garment, and drew herself to full height, putting her outspread hands on her breast.

"There . . ." she murmured, casting a glance at her visitor and waiting for him to turn to her. She was proud of her body. Mén always watched with admiration and impatience as she stood thus, and she was a little disappointed and hurt that this visitor sat so rudely and indifferently with his back to her. She frowned and pouted as she put on a shabby dressing-gown and went to the fire. Without a word or glance at Kobling, she settled herself on the rug, her back to him, her arms outstretched to the fire.

She stayed like that, warming herself, for some time. A neighbouring clock struck ten, and all the other clocks, near and far, chimed in, the wind amplifying the sound. She wondered about her visitor; but her pride forbade her to speak to him. A little later, she loosened her arms from the sleeves of the gown, and wrapped the garment like a cloak around her for a moment, slowly letting it fall until it lay in folds about her hips. Several minutes passed. She felt cold down her back. She spun round angrily. Indignantly, she exclaimed:

"You get on my nerves! I like a man that's sociable. . . ."

Her words were checked. She saw that Kobling was sound asleep. Above the purr of the fire, she could hear his soft snore. She gaped at him. With his legs outstretched, and his head sunken almost despondently on his chest, he aroused a peculiar sensation in her: a conflict of compassion and contempt. Often, she experienced those feelings separately, but had never had them at the same time. Now compassion was fruitless, and she soon had done with it. Contempt passed to a faint desire for revenge. Her pride had been ever so slightly injured. She had given value to this man in some degree, and she felt she had a right to take proper payment. Payment for value, and something extra for her wounded pride.

Kneeling before him, she searched his pockets. Adroitly, her thin, soft fingers slid into his overcoat and travelled to the jacket pocket. His head was in the way. Softly, she stroked his cheek and stirred the head from that side. He went on snoring regularly, while her fingers closed on a wad of notes and extracted them.

Her eyes opened wide. There were surely thirty pounds in her hand, all clean and uncreased notes. She began to work systematically through his pockets, until her fingers closed over the revolver; then she withdrew her hand quickly, gasped and stood up, the notes scattering from her thighs as she scrambled back. She bent down, and keeping her eyes on him, snatched her dressing-gown from near his feet and hastily put it on.

She was shuddering violently. She knew she was going to shriek. Her breath panted in and out of her lungs as if she were being plunged into icy water. She felt the shriek mounting in her, and she put her hands over her lips to stay it. Like that, she tiptoed from the room to the next door. Someone was snoring loudly there. She scratched on the door and entered.

Jimsey was fast asleep at full length on the rug before the fire, while her friend lay in bed reading a novel.

She rushed over to her. "My God! Grace! These two . . . these two we picked up. . . . They're . . . That fellow in there has a revolver! One of them army pattern things . . . and notes . . . a pocket full of them! New ones! He's dead asleep, same as this one! They're dead beat. They've been to some place and made a hold-up or something! Get up! I'm afraid! I shall scream! The Police'll come and

we'll get six months again! Oh . . . Grace! Oh . . . God . . . quick. . . ."

The woman in bed said: "Sh! Sh! Keep quiet!" She was momentarily infected by the other's panic. She, too, wanted to shriek. Then she got hold of herself. She was of a different temperament. She was forty-two, a realist, hard, inured by experiences which threw her friend into sudden hysterics and fears. What made her afraid in this instance, was the sudden appearance in the room of her friend, and her outburst. Again she warned her.

Next moment, the truth dawned on her. She guessed who Kobling and Jimsey were, and she remembered that there was a large reward offered for information about them. Her whole face gleamed wildly. She had them here, and she was determined to gain that reward.

She got out of bed and began to dress hurriedly.

"You wait here, and don't move or make a sound. He'll shoot you if he wakes and finds you watching him. You can either wait here or go back to your room and hop into bed, as if nothin' had happened. That's best. . . ."

"I can't! Oh, I couldn't go back there! Not to save my life!"

"You soft fool! You silly bitch! Do you want to do another stretch? And get me landed for one, too? Do what I tell you!"

"Grace, I couldn't!"

"All right, then. Hop into my bed and keep quiet and wait for me."

"Where you going?"

"To get Charlie. . . . to throw them out. . . ."

"Be quick, then, be quick!"

"Oh, shut up!"

"Grace! I've just thought. . . . Charlie won't be in until midnight!"

"I'll go for the Police, then. The Police. They'll be pleased. That'll keep us in with them."

She put on her coat and was gone the next instant.

The other remained on the bed, trembling. A long time passed. Nothing happened. Jimsey went on snoring. She became calm. Her friend's courage had inspired her. What a woman Grace was! No fear, no sentiment, no nerves at all! Even to think about her was soothing.

She got into the bed. It was warm where Grace had lain. She took up the paper-backed novel and tried to read it, but

her attention wandered. Jimsey snored loudly on the rug, and she put down the novel and watched him for some time. It was strange how both the men had fallen asleep the moment they had come in. Just as if that were all they had come for: somewhere out of the cold; somewhere to rest. What a job they must have done! Perhaps they had shot someone and been chased. Yes, there had been talk in the city to-night! Talk! About . . . she had heard in the bars . . . talk about that barber, Kobling! Then she remembered. Memory was monstrous, like a leer; deathly!

She sat upright, crying out loudly all of a sudden. The sound awoke Jimsey who started up and scrambled to his feet. He saw that the woman in bed was not the one he had come in with. This one was younger than the other. She hadn't the poise, the fine looks, the assurance of her friend. She was afraid of something, too. That mystified him. What had happened whilst he had slept?

"Where's . . ." he began. He checked himself, and jerked his head towards the other room. "Where is he? What's up?"

"I came in here," the woman stammered, watching him.

"Where's my pal?" he demanded.

She pointed to her room. "He's still in there, asleep."

"What you come in here for?" he went on, approaching her.

She huddled away from him, and whimpered in fright.

"What's up? Christ, what's up? Can't you speak?" he said.

"You and that man!" she gasped. "He's Kobling! He's got a gun. . . ."

Jimsey made an exclamation of derision. "Gah! He won't shoot you! All he wants is a good sleep, and somewhere to hide from the Police. Don't you know: his missus was killed in an accident, this afternoon. We come away from the hospital just now. She died before he could get there. Was dead when we got there. We was too late. We made a touch and run for it, but was too late. The Police is all round the place after 'im!"

The woman's fear subsided, and pity took its place. She was touched by what he told her. Curiosity awoke in her.

"Where has he been all the time? How did he get to hospital, with the Police after him?"

"He was hiding," Jimsey said. "The Police was all round the place, waitin' for him. They knew he'd try to get out to

his missus. But we got through. We come up on a lorry. Chap I know drove us over, and he didn't know until we was there who he was drivin'. We told the Police round the gates that we was bringing in a coffin. They let us through. But she was gone. He was too late."

There was a pause. "That's awful," the woman said. "That's why he never said nothing but went to sleep. . . ."

"Let him sleep, then," Jimsey said. "Let me sleep, too. We're done up. Could do with a good sleep. . . ."

"No! You mustn't!" the woman said. "You can't stay here!" She sprang out of bed. "Don't stay! You'll only get caught. She's gone for the Police! Grace has. She'll be back any time now. Don't stay! Don't let him get caught."

She hurried with Jimsey to the next room. Kobling was still asleep in the chair before the fire. They woke him and told him what had happened. He saw his notes on the floor. The woman gathered them and returned them to him.

"I'm sorry . . . I never knew. . . . Take them back. And hurry! Hurry! She'll be back. . . ."

She led the way down the dark stairs, holding a lighted candle to guide them. At the door, she blew out the flame. The wick retained a little spark which glowed and smoked while she spoke to them again and opened the door.

"Good-bye! Good luck!" she whispered. They thanked her, slipped some notes into her hand and went out. Far down the street, the chase was coming; she called to warn them as loudly as she dared, but she need not have troubled, for they had seen the danger and were already slithering rapidly away, hugging the walls and racing towards the first turning.

She closed the door and returned to her room. The pursuit tore past the house a moment later. She waited, hearing Grace enter and come hurrying upstairs. The door burst open.

"Where are they? What happened?" Grace demanded.

The other said quietly: "I let them go."

"Let them go! You fool!" Grace shouted. She rushed at her, almost weeping.

"Yes," the other said. "It was Kobling! His wife died in hospital this evening!"

"I know. I knew it was Kobling. Don't you think I knew? You soft fool! You mad bitch. . . ."

"I let him go. He had enough trouble," the younger said.

"What's that to us?" Grace demanded. "A thousand quid!" Her body swayed with fury. "A thousand quid!"

A thousand . . . easy! She let them go! Oh, you fool . . . fool. . . ."

The other drew back. "God save me! You're hard," she said quietly, staring at her.

They stood confronting each other. The older woman could not speak for rage and disappointment. She was choking. Quite suddenly and unexpectedly, overborne by her sense of loss and the strange, baffling morality of the other, she began to cry. Big tears drowned her eyes and overflowed down her distorted features, while she blubbered repeatedly in a sad, moaning tone: ". . . but a thousand quid! I can't stand it. A thousand quid . . . chucked away! . . . chucked away! "

It was the first time the other had seen her cry. It was odd, inimical to her character which was always fortified against such outbursts. It was ludicrous, absurd. She stood watching the spectacle until it was too much for her. She could not help laughing. She sniggered at first, and finally burst into a shrill, prolonged guffaw which echoed loudly in the room and throughout the silent house.

"My God! . . ." she managed to gasp. ". . . to see you like this! You! My oath! I shall die! "

But the other was inconsolable. She threw herself on her bed and resigned herself to a long fit of weeping. She could have lamented countless things she had lost: her home, her husband, her former friends, her youth and good looks, her place in respectable society. But they did not occur to her. They were not worth a thousand pounds. A thousand pounds! Thrown away! She howled, bit the sheets, kicked. Until her friend threw a cushion at her and stormed out to the other room.

"Damn your bloody temperament! "

VI

Kobling and Jimsey ran on, with Jimsey leading and the barber following several paces behind until they had turned the corner; then they ran side by side. They did not speak; there was no necessity for speech. They had an identical purpose. Kobling ran like a true athlete, settling into a pace which he could have maintained for a considerable time; but Jimsey, who was shorter and weaker and untrained, tired rapidly. They halted.

"Come on. You'll get your second wind soon," Kobling

said. "We can't wait. Breathe evenly, and bring up your knees when you run. Hold your head up. Let your arms brace you. Come on!"

They went on again. They were heading north. They had come a considerable distance. Sometimes, far behind them, they saw or heard the Police. They often outstripped them, but could never altogether shake them off, although they turned, doubled back daringly, hiding in doorways, in basement entrances, and slid off down side streets and beat up northwards again. But the chase clung on, seemed to spring from the darkness ahead, to right or left, and it was only by luck, and sometimes by a great effort, that the two contrived to get clear for a few minutes. After that, they sprinted on again, always heading northwards.

The night had fallen more darkly by now. Dark and windy, with freezing gusts which often impeded the fugitives, and often assisted them. The wind tore swiftly past them down the streets, met them at corners, bursting upon them as they sped round buildings, exactly like a wild dog sporting about them and excited by the chase. A thick frost had settled upon everything in this northern district where the streets were wider, more exposed. It made running difficult, but checked the pursuit as well.

Jimsey and Kobling drew breath then. "We'll be out of the city soon. Ten minutes and we'll be in the fields. . . ."

"They'll be waitin' for us at the top o' this road, I reckon," Jimsey said. "This 'ere joins up with the main road what goes north. They won't let us get through so easy. We better go careful now. No more runnin'."

"You're right, Jimsey. This is as far as we'll get."

They halted in a decrepit warehouse doorway. Some men went by. When they were out of earshot, Jimsey sighed.

"My feet's like fire."

"I don't like this place round here," Kobling said. "I can't remember this district. I'd sooner be on ground I know. Makes you feel safer and . . . sort of . . ."

"I know. Sort of at home. But, tell you . . . if we was to cut right across, about half a mile on there's a road what goes further out than this one. I know it. We might . . ."

"All right, we'll try it. Go easy round corners now."

Again they ran on. When they reached the road, they halted a few paces before the corner, and peered cautiously round. Not fifty steps ahead, there were four constables.

"There you are."

"There you are," Jimsey echoed.

They scampered quietly back. "Try for the city . . . get back," Jimsey suggested. But when they returned to the road which went southwards, through this district and on into the city, there was another handful of Police standing at the crossing; and as they crept off in a westerly direction, hugging the shadows and slackening speed whenever people passed them, they heard voices in adjoining streets.

"I had an idea that was it," Kobling whispered. "They've headed us off to this place, and put a cordon round us. Some fellow who knows this district has worked the detachments round."

"Bastards . . . worked us into this," Jimsey muttered.

"Take it easy a bit and get your breath. We'll try to break through. We'll try a spurt of speed."

Jimsey quailed at the thought of that effort. "We'll never do it, mister. They're all round us," he moaned.

"Once through, we'd be all right. We could get back home."

"Where? Back home? Where's that?" Jimsey asked.

"Get back to Punter. Feel all right back there down by the river."

"You're right about that, mister. But I'm done up. I can't run no more. . . ."

"Course you can," Kobling said. "You've got to! Come on!"

They trotted noiselessly along the street. At the far end, they walked, crept to the corner. Twenty yards away, three constables stood. Kobling gripped Jimsey's arm and flew with him across the road. On towards Punter. Whistles blew. The pursuit gathered behind, thudding, calling. Dark figures threw themselves into its current.

"Run! Come on! Run!" Kobling said. He gripped the back of Jimsey's collar and almost lifted him.

Jimsey's heart lifted. This bloke . . . he had nerve and strength! Could go on for ever, giving them the slip! Could keep his nerve! Weariness and despair faded.

They ran at a great pace, tearing through streets and across roadways, breaking the cordons. Somehow, it was exhilarating. It was terrifying when they came in sight of the Police; but as they sped past, on and on, and eluded the pursuit, it was wonderful, heartening. They were on familiar ground again. They were working towards home, towards all those streets which surrounded the place called home. Kepnor

Road. That was encouraging. They had broken all the cordons so far. They looked at each other and grinned. At the next alley, they turned in and flopped down at full length on the stones.

They dared not speak. They savoured this rest. They were free again, at large, but for how long they could not tell. Nor could they decide where to go or what to do. There was nowhere for them to go.

After a little while, they rose and walked on, going warily, slowly, wandering deeper into Punter Ward. From a neighbouring tower, a clock chimed two. All across the city, the sound of clocks chiming the hour sounded for a while on the high wind. Then again there was only the sound of the wind.

Jimsey and Kobling went on. They reached a street leading to the river. They had not taken two steps that way before they halted. A constable was standing alone in the shadows ten yards ahead, his head bent as he fastened his storm-cape about him. They slid back against the wall and retraced their steps, pelting into a doorway for an instant in case he came stalking them, then setting off at full speed the way they had come. They chose another turning to reach the river.

Ahead, they saw the water swirling under the night. They ran towards it and, rounding the corner near the wharf, felt the wind lifting off the river and driving with a keen, salty smell against their faces. They sniffed, and kept their faces lifted to it, and ran on, all caution gone from them; until, suddenly, caution swept back into them and checked their momentum. They tried to stop, to retreat, to deaden the sound their feet made. They faltered, slid on the icy pavement, grabbed each other, and finally stood quite still.

They had rushed headlong into a group of detectives and Police huddled near a stack of crates. Not twenty paces separated them. For perhaps three seconds there was silence, consternation. Somebody shouted.

"Kobling! Jones!"

And the officers moved forward a little way, all together. Kobling had drawn his revolver. It was the end. He knew this was the end. He spat over the barrel. He was frightened, angry, disappointed. An immense desire was rising in his heart, and he knew he would never be able to satisfy it. He knew he had reached the end of his freedom. Despair became intolerable then, and he mourned what he had lost, feeling grief and despair stun him. Darkness started to close in on

his senses: a peculiar darkness coming from within him. He lifted his revolver to break a way through it with the weapon.

The officers shouted to him:

"Kobling! We have a warrant for your arrest! Drop that gun and stand where you are! Lower that gun! Or we'll fire!"

When they said that, he shoved Jimsey behind him and crept back, slowly, step by step. Perhaps the darkness would leave him.

"The game's up, Kobling! In the name of the law. . . ."

He spat. When he saw the officers draw their revolvers, he moved back more quickly with Jimsey. He recognised one of the officers: a young detective. He remembered him. He recollected having wrestled with him months ago at the Athletic Club. He stared at him, through the darkness, trying to make sure. He brought his revolver up to aim.

He had never used a revolver. He looked along the barrel and tried to press the trigger. It was stiff; the weapon was heavy and unwieldy. He caught it with both hands and aimed again. Something whipped past him. He saw the flash, and heard a report, and shouts. Momentarily, he was startled; then he took quick aim and fired.

The weapon bucked, almost jerked itself from his grip. The noise of the report was very loud. He breathed again. He saw that he had made a hit with his shot. The young constable had fallen and was lying at full length. The other officers had separated, and he saw them aiming at him from half a dozen points. He raised his gun again, but did not know which man to aim at.

The shots came in rapid succession before he could fire again, and the sounds melted into a fierce, sudden stutter which echoed down river for several seconds. After that, there was silence again.

Kobling had dropped his weapon. He was swaying. He turned slightly and saw Jimsey already fallen, and he made as if to face the detectives and rush at them. He took two steps. They were ludicrous, almost mincing movements, like those made by a clown on tiptoe. Suddenly he halted. His body lifted itself to full height. The detectives lowered their revolvers and waited, watching, as his hands stretched out. He remained like that an instant longer. His head fell then, and his face with its mask of blood was no longer visible. Slowly, his legs bent at the knees, and he came down headlong, his body striking the ground with a peculiar, dull sound, sickening to hear, and rolling over on one side with the left

arm twisted so that the hand was left palm upwards. He was quite still.

The Police officers rushed forward and stood around him. One of them leaned down and pushed the body on its back. The shattered face was visible. They left the body and went to look at Jimsey. He, too, was dead; shot through the heart.

"This one is the chap . . . the one who informed. Jimsey Jones. The chap who got him to hospital. . . ."

Another said: "Clever little guy. . . ."

Another officer had returned to the constable Kobling had shot. He called to the others, and they came running back to him.

"He got him! Killed. He's gone! "

They stood round, some of them kneeling and trying to find if he were alive, where he had been shot.

"He was up for promotion."

"No promotion for him, poor kid. That wild fool with his Colt! "

The north wind was blowing furiously about them. They were all very cold, very sick and shocked. They had not expected this appalling tragedy. It was horrible. They put away their revolvers, looked at one another. Some constables were running towards them.

Soon, quite a crowd had collected thereabouts. The constables covered the bodies, but left them lying at the three places where they had fallen. The crowd was kept at a wide circle some distance away, and the detectives stood in a little group nearby and did not move until the ambulance arrived to take the bodies to the mortuary.

VII

Two days later, a new man took over Jimsey's job. Kelly, the manager, showed him where things were kept below stairs, and explained about work and the system of hours and free time. After that, he took him upstairs and showed him a little attic, a sort of cupboard, where the brooms, pails, and slop buckets were stored. All at once, he stopped speaking.

The place looked as if it had been recently inhabited. A space had been cleared. There were some blankets, some clothing, and a pair of shoes. There was a make-shift bed made of old rugs. There were piles of newspapers and old magazines, and on a sheet of notepaper, some notes about

ships had been made. That was all. It was mystifying. What had happened? There had been funny things in the city lately. That fellow Jimsey. . . . Had done some queer things: Mixed up with Kobling. . . .

This was where Kobling had hidden! He whistled. Here! Daring! Right under their noses! Hidden right at their heels! Daring! That miserable little wart! That creeping little louse! Daring! Nerve to do it, to keep Kobling up here!

"What's up, boss?" the new hand asked.

"Tidy this place up a bit," Kelly said. "Take them papers and things out of here and dump 'em downstairs in the cupboard under the stairs. And arrange these here brooms and things, proper like."

That morning, amongst the list of cases before the local Bench, a woman named Lizzie Crane was brought up, charged with being drunk and disorderly and using abusive language to the constable on duty in south Kepnor Road at 10.20 p.m. on the previous day.

The Magistrates looked intently at her as she took her place in the dock. Everything about her was instantly mirth-provoking. The little hat perched on her head; the gaudy dress which was far too large for her; her very face which seemed far too large for her head; and her manner which was genial, large too in its way. And for some reason or other, the moment she stood in the dock, the whole Court burst into an uproar of laughter. The noise filled the place like so much water roaring to and fro in it.

The Magistrates called for order. The Usher roared. The policeman at the door yelled too; and presently the laughter subsided. But by then, the Magistrates themselves—eminent, sedate gentlemen of our city—had become infected and were enjoying their own little spurt of mirth.

The fat stomachs of three of them shook against the bench. One, who was thin, seemed to rattle in his chair. They looked first at one another, then at Lizzie, and went red as they shook and wheezed. The Court watched them, hardly daring to begin again. But a little trickle of sniggers and giggles was curling into the air from the public gallery, and in another moment it had exploded.

At that, Lizzie lifted her big, demure eyes from the floor and stared at the Bench. She could hardly believe what she

